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## Upāya: Skillful means

Theme: Bringing the truth to the level of the people for their benefit and liberation

A study by Piya Tan ©2009

### 1 Scholarly observations

**1.1** Western scholars who pioneered research into the early Buddhist texts were aware of the vital role that skilful means played in the success of the Buddha's teaching. In 1899, the British Buddhism scholar and founder of the Pali Text Society, **T W Rhys Davids**, in the Introduction to his translation of **the Kassapa Sīha, nāda Sutta** (D 8), observes (by way of a broad description) how the Buddha and the early Buddhists adapt the Teaching in a skilful manner so that it is effectively transmitted:

When speaking on sacrifice to a sacrificial priest, on union with God to an adherent of the current theology, on Brahman claims to superior social rank to a proud Brahman, on mystic insight to a man who trusts in it, on the soul to one who believes in the soul theory, the method followed is always the same. Gotama puts himself as far as possible in the mental position of the questioner.

He attacks none of his cherished convictions. He accepts as the starting-point of his own exposition the desirability of the act or condition prized by his opponent-of the union with God (as in the Tevijja), or of sacrifice (as in the Kūṭadanta), or of social rank (as in the Ambaṭṭha), or of seeing heavenly sights, etc (as in the Mahāli), or of the soul theory (as in the Poṭṭhapāda).

He even adopts the very phraseology of his questioner. And then, partly by putting a new and (from the Buddhist point of view) a higher meaning into the words; partly by an appeal to such ethical conceptions as are common ground between them; he gradually leads his opponent up to his conclusion. This is, of course, always Arahātship ...

There is both courtesy and dignity in the method employed. But no little dialectic skill, and an easy mastery of the ethical points involved, are required to bring about the result ...

On the hypothesis, that he was an historical person, of that training and character he is represented in the Piṭakas to have had, the method is precisely that which it is most probable he would have actually followed.

Whoever put the Dialogues together may have had a sufficiently clear memory of the way he conversed, may well have even remembered particular occasions and persons. To the mental vision of the compiler, the doctrine taught loomed so much larger than anything else, that he was necessarily more concerned with that, than with any historical accuracy in the details of the story.

He was, in this respect, in much the same position as Plato when recording the dialogues of Socrates. But he was not, like Plato, giving his own opinions. We ought, no doubt, to think of compilers, rather than of a compiler. The memory of co-disciples had to be respected, and kept in mind. And so far as the actual doctrine is concerned our Dialogues are probably a more exact reproduction of the thoughts of the teacher than the dialogues of Plato.

However this may be, the method followed in all these Dialogues has one disadvantage. In accepting the position of the adversary, and adopting his language, the authors compel us, in order to follow what they give us as Gotama's view, to read a good deal between the lines. The *argumentum ad hominem* can never be the same as a statement of opinion given without reference to any particular person. That is strikingly the case with our present Sutta.

(D:RD 1899 1: 206 f)

**1.2** The same sentiment is echoed by the British scholar, **Richard F Gombrich**, in his *How Buddhism Began*, when he says,

It is true that the term translated “skill in means,” *upāya-kauśalya*, is post-canonical, but the exercise of skill to which it refers, the ability to adapt one’s message to the audience, is of enormous importance in the Pali Canon.” (1997: 17)

However, as we shall see Gombrich and other scholars surprisingly missed the occurrences of the term *upāya kosalla* (Skt *upāya kauśalya*) [3.1] in the early texts; and although Gombrich speaks of its “enormous importance in the Pali Canon,” even specialists like **Michael Pye** think that “there is no evidence whatever that the Buddha himself ever used the terminal of skilful means,” but he nevertheless discusses the occurrences of the term or idea in the Pali Canon (1987: 118 f).

**1.3** The use and, often enough, abuse or misconception, of skilful means is well known throughout Mahāyāna. Every idea or action that diverges from early Buddhism is apparently passed off by Mahāyāna writers and proponents as “skilful means.” However, ethics specialists like **Damien Keown** notes that Mahāyāna, “for the most part, continued to be rigorous in its observance of the basic precepts” (1992:163).

In this study, we shall focus on skilful means as found in the early Buddhist texts, under the section heading, “Early Buddhist Usage.” Then, we will examine some “Mahāyāna developments.” It must be stated forthright that this is not so much an academic study (though we should give due weight to what careful scholars have deliberated) as it is a practitioner’s survey of the meaning and purpose of skillful means as found in the Buddhist texts, so that it is relevant to our practice today.

## EARLY BUDDHIST USAGE

### 2 The Buddha decides to teach

#### **2.1 TEXTUAL BACKGROUND**

**2.1.1** There is a popular story or legend that the Buddha, immediately after awakening, hesitates to teach his Dharma to the world.<sup>1</sup> An average person, caught up with worldly desires and unliberated in mind, would find it extremely difficult to understand or follow the Dharma. The individualistic and self-assured “intellectual” might find some words for it but may find no place for it in his heart, and the morally weak worldling, thinking that it is beyond his capacity, would be simply discouraged from even approaching it. These sentiments are recorded in a number of places in the Pali Canon with these stanzas:

I have discovered the truth with difficulty:  
Enough with declaring it!  
For it will never be easily understood [be easily awakened to]  
By those lost in lust and hate.

It goes against the current, abstruse,  
profound, deep, hard to see, subtle—  
Those dyed in lust will not see it,

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<sup>1</sup> See Why the Buddha hesitated to teach, SD 12.1.

nor those shrouded in massive darkness.<sup>2</sup>

Considering thus, monks, my mind inclined to inaction rather than to teaching the Dharma.

(V 1:4 = M 1:169 = S 1:136; D 2:37 Vipassī Buddha; Mvst 3:315)

At this point, it is said, **Brahmā Sahampati**, the seniormost of the High Gods,<sup>3</sup> perceiving the Buddha's thought, becomes alarmed and cries out, "The world is lost!" Fearing that the world might perish through not hearing the Dharma, he entreats the Buddha to teach the Dharma, as there are

... beings with little dust in their eyes who are falling away because they do not hear the Dharma. There will be those who will understand the Dharma. (V 1:5-7 = M 1:169 = S 1:138 f)

**2.1.2** The story continues in the closing passages of **the Āyācana Sutta** (S 6.1), where the Buddha's thoughts are recorded, reflecting the occasion in this parable of the lotus-pond:

**12** Just as in a **lotus pond of the blue or white or red lotuses**,<sup>4</sup> some lotuses might be born in the water, grow up in the water, and thrive while submerged in the water, without rising out of the water; some lotuses might be born in the water, grow up in the water, and stand up at an even level with the water; some lotuses might be born in the water and grow up in the water, but would rise up from the water and stand up in the water without being soiled by the water—

So, too, surveying the world with the Buddha Eye, the Blessed One sees beings with little dust in their eyes and with much dust in their eyes, with keen faculties and with dull faculties, with good qualities and with bad qualities, easy to teach and difficult to teach, and a few who dwelt seeing blame and fear in the next world.

**13** Having seen this, he answers Brahmā Sahampati in verse:

Open are the doors to the Deathless

For those who would hear! Give up the (troublesome) shraddha [ancestor worship]!<sup>5</sup>

Perceiving the trouble, O Brahmā, I did not speak<sup>6</sup>

The refined, sublime Dharma among humans.

<sup>2</sup> This verse recurs at Mv 1.5.3 (V 1:5\*) = Mahā'padāna S (D 14.3.2.3/2:36, Vipassī Buddha), SD 49.8 = Ariya Pariyesanā S (M 26,19.7/1:168), SD 1.11 = Āyācana S (S 6.1/1:136), SD 12.2; Mvst 3:315.

<sup>3</sup> "The seniormost of the High Gods," *jeṭṭhā mahā, brahmā* (DA 2:467).

<sup>4</sup> *uppala* (Skt *utpala*), *paduma* (Skt *padma*) and *puṇḍarīka* respectively. Cf Sāmañña, phala S (D 2.80/1:75), SD 8.10 & Kāya, gatā, sati S (M 119,20/3:93 f), SD 14.21, where the simile of lotuses in a pond is applied in the context of the 3<sup>rd</sup> dhyana.

<sup>5</sup> *Pamuñcantu saddham* (BHS *śraddhāṃ pramuñcantu*), alt tr: "Let them declare their faith" or "Give up your faith." A difficult sentence. Dīgha Subcomy glosses as *saddham pavedentu*, "let them declare their faith"; Woodward: "renounce the creed ye hold" (Woodward 1973:7); Horner: "let them renounce their faith" (V:H 1:9); "abandon other faiths" (Nakamura 2000:462); Walshe: "put forth faith" (D:W 215); Bodhi: "release faith" (S:B 1:233); cf Norman: "declare your faith" (Sn 1146). See esp Masefield 1985:76-80; also Sn:N n1146 and Nakamura 2000:461 f, n 53. My tr is conjectural for the foll reasons: (1) it is uncertain whether the Pali here is *saddhā* (faith) or *saddha* (ancestor worship); (2) Ved Skt *śraddhā* = faith, but *śraddha* = ancestor worship is Class Skt; (3) Mvst ad loc has *śraddhāṃ*, likely = Pali *saddhā* (faith). On *saddha* (short final -a) = Class Skt *śraddha*, see D 1:97; A 1:160, 5:269-273, 273; J 2:360; DA 1:267. It is possible that the brahminical *śraddha* was just beginning in the Buddha's time. Interestingly, PED proposes the interesting interpretation of *saddham pamuñcati* (V 1:7; D 2:39; Sn 1146), as "to give up offerings, to abandon Brahmanism" (PED: Saddha<sup>2</sup>). PED takes *saddha* as a synecdoche for Brahmanism.

<sup>6</sup> *Vihimsā, saññā pagunaṃ na bhāsīm*; BHS *viheṭṭha, saṃjñā praguṇa abhūsi* (Mvst 3:319); Skt *praviśanti śraddhā na viheṭṭha, saṃjñāḥ*, "they enter the faith that is not troubling" (Lalv 25.34; Vaidya 293).

**14** Then, Brahmā Sahampati, having known, “There is consent by the Blessed One for the teaching of the truth [Dharma]!”<sup>7</sup> pays homage to the Blessed One, keeping him to the right, disappeared right there.<sup>8</sup> (S 6.1,12-14/1:138), SD 12.2

## 2.2 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BUDDHA’S TEACHING.

### 2.2.1 The Buddha’s quest

Such texts as the **Ariya Pariyesanā Sutta** (M 26) give us a good idea how and why the Buddha renounces the world, as this passage clearly shows:

**13** Bhikshus, before my self-awakening, while I was still only an unawakened Bodhisattva,<sup>9</sup> I, too, being myself subject to birth, sought what was also subject to birth; ... subject to decay; ... subject to sickness; ... subject to death; ... subject to sorrow; being myself subject to defilement, sought what was also subject to defilement.<sup>10</sup>

Then, bhikshus, I thought thus:

‘Why should I, being myself subject to birth, sought what was also subject to birth; ... subject to decay; ... subject to sickness; ... subject to death; ... subject to sorrow; being myself subject to defilement, sought what was also subject to defilement?’

Suppose that I, being myself subject to birth, having understood the danger in what is subject to birth, were to seek the unborn supreme security from bondage, nirvana.

Suppose that I, being myself subject to decay ... subject to sickness ... subject to death ... subject to sorrow, subject to defilement, were to seek the undefiled supreme security from bondage, nirvana.’

**14 RENUNCIATION.** Bhikshus, later, while still young, a black-haired young man endowed with the blessing of youth, in the prime of life, though my mother and father wished otherwise and wept with tearful faces, I shaved off my hair and beard, put on the saffron robe, and went forth from the household life into the homeless life.<sup>11</sup> (M 26,13-14/1:163), SD 1.11

This passage shows that when the Buddha leaves home, his goal is that of personal liberation from suffering, not to found a new religion. However, the early Buddhist texts [2.1] also record how after the

<sup>7</sup> *Katāvakāso kho’ mhi bhagavatā* [vl *bhagavato*] *dhmma,desanāya*, free tr: “The Blessed One has consented to the teaching of the Dharma!” Here *bhagavato* (dat, gen) (PTS 1884) appears to be wr. In *Ariya Pariyesanā S* (M 26,21/1:169), M:ÑB (similarly at V:H 4:10) has “I have created the opportunity for the Blessed One to teach the Dhamma.” CPD: *katāvakāso*, however, remarks that this rendition is “both grammatically impossible and contextually unlikely; the reading *bhagavato* at S 1:138,26, however, would seem to represent a reinterpretation of the clause supporting the traditional interpretation of the passage, unless the gen is taken as the gen of the agent to be construed with *katāvakāso*.” CPD cites *Mahā,vastu, bhagavatā mahābrahmaṇe avakāśe kṛte* (Mvst 3:319), “which would seem to support the interpretation suggested above.”

<sup>8</sup> V 1:7; M 1:170; S 1:138; D 2:39 Vipassī Buddha; Mvst 3:318; cf. S:B 1:233 n372; also Sn 1146c.

<sup>9</sup> *Pubbe va sambodhā anabhisambuddhassa Bodhisattass’eva sato*, as at Bhaya,bherava S (M 4,3/1:17), Dve-dhā,vitakka S (M 19,2/1:114), Mahā Saccaka S (M 36,12/1:240), Bodhi Rāja,kumāra S (M 85,10/2:93), Saṅgārava S (M 100,9/2:211), but different contexts. See also S 2:5, 10, 104, 170, 3:27, 4:7, 8, 97, 289, 5:263, 281; A 1:258, 3:240-242 (passim), 4:439; Pm 2:109; Miln 235.

<sup>10</sup> *Sukhumāla S* (A 3.38/1:145 f) and *Mada S* (A 3.39/1:146 f) form the prelude to this section.

<sup>11</sup> This same statement is made *mutatis mutandis* by *Soṇa,daṇḍa* (*Soṇa,daṇḍa S*, D 4,6/1:115), SD 30.5, and by *Kūṭa,danta* (*Kūṭa,danta S*, D 5,7/1:131), SD 18.6.

Buddha has awakened, he is again reminded of the world's sufferings. Like a doctor who has discovered the nature of a plague and its cure, he feels compelled to heal the afflicted.<sup>12</sup>

A preliminary thought that arises in the newly awakened Buddha's mind is that he has taken years and gone through so much trouble to discover the answer, and perhaps should take a well deserved break. Moreover, the Dharma or liberating truth that he has discovered, goes against the fashion and flow of the world. How could worldlings, drowned in the bipolarity of lust and hate, ever awaken to such a truth?

The point is that *true wisdom* always embraces *great compassion*. It is simply impossible for one who has awakened to great wisdom, the direct knowledge of reality, who is fully liberated from suffering, could watch others afflicted by those same sufferings. With great wisdom, comes great compassion.

### **2.2.2 The Buddha's great compassion**

A first thought that crosses the newly awakened Buddha's mind is that of the time and difficulty he underwent to discover the liberating truth. After six years of self-mortification, followed by a period of profound meditation, he is surely entitled to a well-deserved respite. Moreover, the Dharma he has discovered goes against the flow of the fashion of a society, drowned and dragged about by the twin currents of lust and hate, rooted in ignorance. How are such people and beings ever to understand the Dharma, much less even listen to it?

However, recalling his own experiences of joy and pain before his awakening, he well knows the predicament of the samsaric world. Just as a medical researcher, who has worked hard to discover the cure for the plague, on discovering it, would at once attempt to use it to stop the plague, the Buddha is simply moved by compassion to heal the world.

This point must be emphasized. We have seen in **the *Soṇa,daṇḍa Sutta*** (D 4) how the Buddha stresses that the true saint has *both* wisdom *and* moral virtue, as noted by British Buddhist ethicist, **Damien Keown**,

The conclusion to be drawn from the passage from the *Discourse of Soṇadaṇḍa* is that moral excellence is an essential dimension of human perfection. This needs emphasizing since it is usually overlooked and almost always made secondary to intellectual development. (1992: 39)<sup>13</sup>

The point is that the Buddha's awakening to true reality not only liberates him from suffering, but also put him vicariously in the position of those who have *not* been liberated. To be liberated means to know that there are others who are not. With great wisdom comes great compassion.

### **2.2.3 Brahmā's "invitation" to teach**

**The Āyācana Sutta** (S 6.1) says that some weeks after the Great Awakening,<sup>14</sup> the Buddha, while sitting under the Aja,pāla Nigrodha (Goatherd's Banyan), is approached by Mahā Brahmā (whom the brahmins regard as their Supreme Creator-God) to teach the Dharma to the world. Little known is the fact that **Brahmā Saham,pati**, as he is called, according to the Commentaries, is a non-returner (*anāgāmi*) from the Suddh'āvāsā (SnA 2:476), there to pass a whole aeon (*kappa*), because he has developed the first dhyana when he was a monk (BA 12).

<sup>12</sup> For the well known doctor imagery, see Cūḷa Māluṅkyā,putta S (M 63,5.2), SD 5.8. See also The teacher or the teaching, SD 3.14.

<sup>13</sup> See *Soṇa,daṇḍa S* (D 4), SD 30.5 (3.1).

<sup>14</sup> For the immediate events following the Great Awakening, see The first seven weeks, SD 63.1.

The early audience, new to the Buddha's teaching, would not appreciate this fact; but it is sufficient for them to find Buddhism attractive enough to know that their own Supreme God has condescended to invite the Buddha to teach the Dharma.

Those who are more comfortable taking Buddhism as a *non-theistic* teaching, might see such an episode as a skilful means or bridge for the Indians of the Buddha's time to cross over to his teaching. Such a skilful means, entails the use of not only local dialects, but also a religious language that our audience understands.<sup>15</sup>

#### **2.2.4 The earliest audience**

**The Āyācana Sutta** (S 6.1) further describes graphically how the Buddha surveys the world with his Buddha-eye, that is, his omniscience,<sup>16</sup> and describes his vision in the parable of the lotus pond [2.1]. He sees

beings with little dust in their eyes and with much dust in their eyes, with keen faculties and with dull faculties, with good qualities and with bad qualities, easy to teach and difficult to teach, and a few who dwelt seeing blame and fear in the next world. (S 6.1,12/1:138), SD 12.2

The Buddha is moved by those “with *little* dust in their eyes ... , with *keen* faculties ... , with *good* qualities ... , *easy* to teach ... , and a few who dwelt seeing blame and fear in the next world.” For, just as the lotuses on the water-surface would open when touched by sun-light, the spiritually ready (*veneyya*) beings would awaken on hearing the Dharma. Otherwise, they “are falling away because they do not hear the Dharma.” Like lost and weakened travelers, they need to be nourished with the food of the Dharmas and shown the right path.

Those “with *much* dust in their eyes, ... with *dull* faculties, ... with *bad* qualities, ... and *difficult* to teach, and a few who dwelt seeing blame and fear in the next world,” unlike the spiritually ready, are easily swayed towards life's dark side. With the Buddha's wisdom and compassion, however, with the Dharma and the awakened saints, even such beings have a much better chance of turning and moving towards the light.<sup>17</sup>

#### **2.2.5 The first students**

When the Buddha starts to teach, he is effectively setting up an open university of the mind. Indeed, one of the world's first universities was that at Nālandā (427-1197), and the first western universities were also monastic (usually as cathedral schools).<sup>18</sup> In fact, the first disciples the Buddha converts are either those who are spiritually mature or are highly intelligent seekers of truth.

The Buddha's first listeners are the five monks—Koṇḍañña, Vappa, Bhaddiya, Mahānāma and Assaji—all familiar with his quest, and are his attendants up to just before the awakening.<sup>19</sup> Soon after the awakening of the five monks, the Buddha himself goes on to convert Yasa and his 54 friends, so that there are a total of 60 arhats in the world. The Buddha then assembles them and entrusts them with the great commission, to go forth and spread the teaching, each in his own direction.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>15</sup> See Araṇa Vibhaṅga S (M 139/3:230-236), SD 7.8.

<sup>16</sup> On the Buddha's eye and other types of eyes, see Miracles, SD (5.5.1)

<sup>17</sup> See further Why the Buddha hesitated, SD 12.1 (3).

<sup>18</sup> See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University>.

<sup>19</sup> See Dhamma, cakka Pavattana S (S 56.11/5:420-424), SD 1.1 Intro (9) & Ariya Pariyesanā S (M 26.26-30/1:171-173), SD 1.11 (6).

<sup>20</sup> See The great commission, SD 11.2.



The Buddha himself goes to Uruvelā, where he converts the group of 30 young men (V 1: 23 f) and the 3 matted-hair fire-worshipping Kassapa brothers (V 1:24-35) together with their 1000 disciples, and then teaches them **the Āditta,pariyāya Sutta**.<sup>21</sup> All these events happen in the 1<sup>st</sup> year of the ministry. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> year, the Buddha meets with rajah Bimbisāra (V 1:35-39), and in due course ordains the 2 chief disciples, Sāriputta and Moggallāna (V 1:39-43).

### 2.2.6 Monasticism as skilful means.

**2.2.6.1 EVENTS OF THE FIRST 2 YEARS.** The period from the Great Awakening to the conversion of the two chief disciples cover the first two years of the Buddha's ministry. They are all recorded in the Mahā, -vagga of the Vinaya (V 1:1-44).<sup>22</sup> This account is important as evidence of how the Buddha skilfully sends out his missionaries and introduces various ordination methods to accommodate the great number of converts as candidates for the monastic order. Here is a summary of the mentioned chapters of the Mahā,vagga of the Vinaya:

Mv 1.1	(V 1:1 f)	The Buddha awakens under the Bodhi tree.
Mv 1.2	(V 1:2 f)	Aja,pāla Nigrodha (goatherd banyan): the <i>humhumka</i> brahmin.
Mv 1.3	(V 1:3)	Mucalinda tree and the naga Mucalinda.
Mv 1.4	(V 1:3)	Rāj'āyatana tree: the two merchants, Tapussa and Bhalluka.
Mv 1.5	(V 1:3-7)	The Buddha "hesitates" to teach & Brahmā's entreaty.
Mv 1.6	(V 1:7-14)	Seeking suitable disciples; Upaka; the five monks & the first discourse; the five ordained by <u>the "come, bhikshus" ordination</u> . <sup>23</sup>
Mv 1.7	(V 1:15-18)	Yasa's renunciation and awakening; Yasa's father goes for refuge.
Mv 1.8	(V 1:18)	Yasa's mother and erstwhile wife become first women disciples.
Mv 1.9-10	(V 1:18-20)	Yasa's 54 friends join the order.
Mv 1.11	(V 1:20 f)	The great commission: the sending out of the 60 arhats.
Mv 1.12	(V 1:21 f)	A flood of new converts; <u>going-forth and ordination by refuge-going</u> . <sup>24</sup>
Mv 1.13	(V 1:22)	Māra appears to the Buddha who at once recognizes him.
Mv 1.14	(V 1:23 f)	The 30 young men join the order.
Mv 1.15-21	(V 1:24-35)	Conversion of the three Kassapa brothers, matted-hair ascetics.
Mv 1.22	(V 1:35-39)	The Buddha meets Bimbi,sāra; the gift of the bamboo grove.
Mv 1:23-24	(V 1:39-44)	The awakening and renunciation of Sāriputta and Moggallāna.

**2.2.6.2 ORDINATION AS SKILFUL MEANS.** The important point to note here is how the ordination procedure evolved to accommodate the number and kind of candidates who joined the order. The great saints who were directly admonished by the Buddha and became arhats, were accepted into the order by the Buddha's pronouncing "Come, bhikshu!" (*ehi bhikkhu*) or "Come, bhikshus!" (*etha bhikkhave*). This is the first kind of ordination, used only by the Buddha himself.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> V 1:35 f; S 35.28.

<sup>22</sup> Mv 1.1.1-1.24.7 = V 1:1-44; summarized at J 1:77-85 (which continues with the Buddha's first visit to Kapila-vatthu (see V 1:82 f) and the gift of Jeta,vana by Anātha,piṇḍika, J 1:77-94), all of which constitutes Jātaka Comy's "proximate account" (*santike nidāna*) of the Buddha: see J:J 1990: 103-127.

<sup>23</sup> *Ehi,bhikkhu upasampadā*. See below.

<sup>24</sup> *Ti,saraṇa,gamana pabbajjā upasampadā*. See below.

<sup>25</sup> There are two main kinds of ehi bhikkhu ordination: for arhats, the formula is simply, "Come, bhikshu! (*ehi bhikkhu*) and the pl form; or "Come, bhikshu! Well-taught is the Dharma. Live the holy life" (*ehi bhikkhu, svākkhāto dhammo, cara brahma,cariyaṃ*), in the case of Yasa (Mv 1.7.14 = V 1:18); and for non-arhat saints, the phrase "for

The second kind of ordination was introduced when the 60 missionaries brought back their converts to join the order. As their number was large, the Buddha allowed the missionary-saints themselves to ordain these candidates by “the going-forth and ordination by refuge-going” (*ti,saraṇa,gamana pabbajjā upasampadā*) (Mv 1.1.12).<sup>26</sup>

In due course, the Buddha abolished the second method and instituted the third method, that of “the ordination by an act of a motion and 3 announcements” (*ñatti,cattuttha,kamma*),<sup>27</sup> that is, a formal act of “four motions” by a conclave of at least five full-fledged monks (the predecessor of the parliamentary act). The act-master (*kamma,vācācāriya*), or the first ordination recites the ordination act (*kamma,vācā*) before the assembled sangha, doing so thrice. He pauses momentarily after each recitation, having asked if anyone objects to the ordination proposal. If the assembly is silent, he goes on with the recitation. At the end of the third recitation, with the approving silence, he would switch his chant into a higher pitch in minor key, and proclaim that the motion is carried, and the candidate is now an ordained monk. This is the method that is still practised today by Theravada monastics.<sup>28</sup>

The acceptance of arhats and saints of the path into the order by the “Come, bhikshu” ordination is a natural procedure. By pronouncing “Come, bhikshu” or “Come, bhikshus,” the Buddha is acknowledging the saint’s awakening. Even without this gesture (as in the case of Bāhiyā),<sup>29</sup> such saints automatically become members of the noble community (*ariya saṅgha*). Those accepted into the order by the “four-motion” ordination who are not saints form the conventional order (*sammutti saṅgha*),<sup>30</sup> whose purpose is “to work for the utter end of suffering” (*sammā dukkhassa anta,kiriyāya*). The sangha, naturally, provides the best conditions for the attaining of awakening in this life itself.

**2.2.6.3 THE EARLY MONASTERIES.** Even in such ancient discourses as **the Pabbajjā Sutta** (Sn 3.1), we see the Buddha being supported by royalty, in this case, Bimbisāra, the king of Magadha.<sup>31</sup> **The Vinaya** records the first meeting between the Buddha and the rajah Bimbisāra to be a grand occasion, when the

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the total ending of suffering” (*sammā dukkhassa anta,kiriyāya*) is added, as in the cases of Yasa’s 4 friends (Mv 1.-9.4 = V 1:19) and 50 others (Mv 1.10.4 @ V 1:20). See The great commission, SD 11.2.

<sup>26</sup> Mv 1.1.12 @ V 1:21 f. For the 3 types of refuge-going, see SD 43.4 (4.2.3).

<sup>27</sup> Lit, “an act with the resolution as the fourth,” ie the motion (or proposal) for the ordination of a candidate (*upasampadāpekkha*) is recited thrice, and if there is no objection, the motion is carried. (A *motion* becomes a *resolution* of the whole meeting if it “carries,” ie, it obtains necessary number of votes, or is not objected to. A *resolution* is what a *motion* seeks to become.) See Mv 9.3.4-9 = V 1:317-319 & S Dutt, *Early Buddhist Monachism*, London, 1924: 50.

<sup>28</sup> For a summary (Dhammayut Nikai), see Khantipalo 1979: 223-229 (App: Ordination procedure in brief): [http://www.palikanon.com/english/arhats/arahants20.htm#\\_ftnref1](http://www.palikanon.com/english/arhats/arahants20.htm#_ftnref1). For details, see Vajirañāṇavarorasa, *Ordination Procedure (Upasampada,vidhī)* [1917], Bangkok, 1973. [http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf\\_file/ordination.pdf](http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/ordination.pdf). For the Mahanikai procedure, see Piyasilo, *Ordination According to Thai Buddhist Tradition*, Bangkok, 1972 (available at National Library, Bangkok).

<sup>29</sup> On Bāhiyā Dāru,cīriya, see (Jhāna) Bāhiyā S (U 1.10/6-9), SD 33.7.

<sup>30</sup> The Saṅgha as refuge (*saraṇa*) has always been the *ariya,saṅgha* (MA 1:131), which quotes Vv 51, which refers to the saints of the path (DA 1:1,9\* = MA 1:1,15\* = SA 1:1,10\* = AA 1:1,12\*), and which is the field of supreme meri (UA 1:1,11\* = Pv 1:1,11\* = Vv 1:1,11\* = ThaA 1:1\*). Cf “He is called a supreme individual of the noble community” (*sattamo puggalo eso ariya,saṅghassa vuccati*, A 3:373,18\*).

<sup>31</sup> Sn 3.1/405-424; see Nakamura 2000:309-318. Sn 3.1 suggests that Bimbisāra does not know or could not remember who the Buddha is; but Vinaya account (Mv 1.39 = V 1:35-39) records the Bodhisattva as knowing Bimbisāra, even before the awakening. It is unlikely that after the 6-7 years of the noble quest, Bimbisāra is unable to recognize the Buddha. It is likely that V account is later. This question of whether they both know each other or not does not alter the fact that Bimbisāra shows great faith in the Buddha upon their meeting.



Kassapa brothers (erstwhile fire-worshippers) openly declare the Buddha as their teacher. Hearing the Buddha's teaching, it is said, Bimbisāra and his assembly become streamwinners.<sup>32</sup>

Bimbisāra invites the Buddha and the monks for alms-offering on the following day. At the end of the alms-offering, the rajah Bimbisāra donates **the Bamboo Grove** (*veḷu,vana*)<sup>33</sup> to the sangha headed by the Buddha. The sangha now has a proper common space for residence and training the unawakened monks, and for teaching the public.

It should further be noted that these early monasteries are not at all like the imposing, comfortable, even luxurious, modern urbanized "monasteries" or "dhyana" temples. The early monasteries are actually spacious parks with numerous shady trees, and even near-tame animals (such as squirrels, deer, and peacocks). The Buddha's living quarters is a simple one-room cell, perhaps with only a front balcony to receive visitors. The monks' lodgings, too, are simple cells, just large enough for a single person to meditate and rest in.<sup>34</sup>

**2.2.6.4 THE CHIEF DISCIPLES.** The ordination of the Buddha's chief disciples, namely, the brahmins, **Sāriputta and Moggallāna**, occurs in Rājagaha, and forms a key episode in the intellectual and spiritual growth of the order. More germane to us here is that it is instructive for our understanding of the use of skillful means in the growth of Buddhism. While the majority of the Buddha's disciples are converted through *listening* to his word, Sāriputta, the wisest of them knows that he has found the true Dharma through *seeing* the inner stillness of the elder Assaji expressed in his calm and clear radiant exterior.<sup>35</sup>

**The Vinaya** recounts the meeting between the newly awakened Assaji, one of the first 5 monks, and the wanderer Sāriputta (then a disciple of the heterodox teacher, Saṅjaya).<sup>36</sup> On seeing Assaji, Sāriputta is impressed by the former's radiant demeanour. As Assaji is on his alms-round, Sāriputta politely waits for the proper moment. Sāriputta follows Assaji, and then attends to him as he takes his meal and finishes it. Then, Sāriputta questions him about the Dharma.

Assaji at first insists that he is very new to the Dharma. When Sāriputta persists in asking for a teaching from Assaji, he utters this famous verse:

*Ye dhammā hetu-p,pabhavā  
tesaṃ hetuṃ tathāgato āha*

Of all things that arise from a cause,  
their cause the Tathāgata has told.

As soon as Sāriputta (then called Upatissa) hears these first two lines, he is established in the fruit of streamwinning. Then Assaji completes the stanza:

*tesañ ca yo nirodho  
evaṃ vādī mahā,samaṇo*

and also how these cease to be—  
This too the great sage has told. (V 1:40; J 1:85)

Two weeks later, according to **the Dīgha,nakha Sutta** (M 74), Sāriputta, standing behind the Buddha fanning him,<sup>37</sup> listens to the Buddha's exhortation to Dīgha,nakha. As he stands there listening, he awakens to arhathood.<sup>38</sup> Moggallāna, too, has already awakened as an arhat a week before Sāriputta.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>32</sup> J 1:83; PvA 22. See Bimbisāra, SD 70.5.

<sup>33</sup> Further details on the Buddha's early years at the Bamboo Grove and Rājagaha are found at Cv 6.1.1- 6.4.10 = V 2:146-159. See also Nakamura 2000: 309-318 & nn.

<sup>34</sup> For an idea of the size of such cells, see Sangh 6-7 (V 3:149,10-18, 156,15-20). See Gethin 1998: 95-100.

<sup>35</sup> On the story of Sāriputta & Moggallāna, see Nakamura 2000: 319-327.

<sup>36</sup> Mv 1:23 @ V 1:39 f.

<sup>37</sup> The Pali Canon records at least six instances of a monk fanning the Buddha: (1) Nāga,samāla (Mahā Sīhanāda S, M 12,64/1:83); (2) Sāriputta (Dīgha,nakha S, M 74,14/ 1:501 f); (3) Ānanda (2 instances): Mahā Parinibbāna S (D 16,1.4/2:73) & Vassakāra S (A 7.20.2/4:18); (4) Upavāṇa (2 instances): Pāsādika S (D 29) mentions Upavāṇa fanning the Buddha, ie, just after the Buddha has given Cunda Samaṇ'uddesa an instruction on the 4 satipatthanas (D

While Sāriputta's awakening is described in **the Anupada Sutta** (M 111),<sup>40</sup> Moggallāna's awakening is recorded in the first nine discourses of **the Moggallāna Saṃyutta** (the collected sayings on Moggallāna) of the Saṃyutta Nikāya. These nine discourses recount Moggallāna's meditative experiences during the week-long effort to attain arhathood immediately after he has become a monk. Such records serve as valuable documents to inspire the Buddha's posterity to walk the same path to awakening.

### 2.2.7 The 3 fields

Another important skilful means the Buddha uses is that of giving the right priorities<sup>41</sup> to the various kinds of individuals and audiences. The first priority of teaching and tutelage are, of course, given to those "with *little* dust in their eyes ... , with *keen* faculties ... , with *good* qualities ... , *easy* to teach ... , and a few who dwelt seeing blame and fear in the next world." And after that, the Buddha would teach those "with *much* dust in their eyes, ... with *dull* faculties, ... with *bad* qualities, ... and *difficult* to teach, and a few who dwelt seeing blame and fear in the next world" [2.2.4].

This skilful means is graphically presented in the parable of the 3 fields, found in **the (Khetta) Desanā Sutta** (S 42.7):

THE 3 FIELDS. "Now what do you think, headman? Suppose a farmer here has three fields, one excellent, one moderate, and one poor, hard, salty, of bad soil. When that farmer wants to sow his seeds, which field would he sow first: the best field ... , the middling field ... , or the poor field ...?"

THE WISE FARMER. "The farmer, bhante, wishing to sow his seeds, would first sow the best field ... , and having done so he would sow the middling one ... . Having done so, he might or might not sow the field that is poor ....

Why is that? Because in any case it might do for cattle-food."

(1) THE BEST FIELD (*agga khetta*). "Well, headman, just like that best field are **my monks and nuns**. I teach them the Dharma that is good in its beginning, good in its middle and good in its ending, both in the spirit and in the letter. I make known to them the holy life that is wholly perfect and pure.

Why is that? Because, headman, these people abide with me for their island, with me for their cave and shelter, with me for stronghold, with me for their refuge.

(2) THE MIDDLING FIELD (*majjhima khetta*). Then, headman, just like that middling field are **my laymen disciples and laywomen disciples**. I teach them the Dharma that is good ... I make known to them the holy life ...

Why is that? Because, headman, these people abide with me for their island ... for their refuge.

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29,41/3:141), which is probably on a different occasion from the instance reported in Mahā Parinibbāna S (D 16,5.4/2:138), when again he fans the dying Buddha. Comy says that although the Buddha is fanned, he feels neither warm nor cold (AA 4:14). Analayo notes that while the Majjhima rarely mentions a monk fanning the Buddha, the Madhyama Āgama (in Chinese tr) regularly depicts the Buddha being fanned, eg MĀ 33 = T1.474a19 || M 106; MĀ 204 = T1.775c17 || M 26; MĀ 205 = T1.779a10 || M 64; MĀ 212 = T1.793a1 || M 90; MĀ 213 = T.1.-797b19 || M 89 (2005:54 n83). Cf Thich Minh Chau, *The Chinese Madhyama Āgama and the Pāli Majjhima Nikāya*, 1991:30.

<sup>38</sup> M 74,14/1:500 f (SD 16.1).

<sup>39</sup> See Sāriputta Moggallāna S 1 (A 4.167/2:154 f), SD 46.16 & Sāriputta Moggallāna S 2 (A 4.168/2:155), SD 46.17. See also Paṭhama Jhāna S (S 40.1), SD 24.11 (1.2).

<sup>40</sup> M 111/3:25-29 (SD 56.4).

<sup>41</sup> On spiritual priorities, see Ādhipateyya S (A 3.40/1:147-150), SD 27.3.

(3) THE POOR FIELD (*hīna khetta*). Then, headman, just like that field that is poor, hard, salty, of bad soil, are **my followers of other sects, recluses, brahmins and wandering ascetics**.<sup>42</sup> To them, too, I teach the Dharma that is good ... I make known to them the holy life ...

Why is that? Because if it be that they understand but a single sentence of it, that would be for their benefit and happiness for a long time to come." (S 42.7/4:315 f, abridged), SD 12.1(3.2)

The Buddha, or a wise Dharma teacher, would first and fully teach the monks and nuns, that is, those who commit themselves full-time to working towards self-awakening in this life itself and to propagating the Dharma. Not only are such monastics learning to live the holy life, but they also have a great store of good karma accumulated from many lives.<sup>43</sup>

At a proper time, such as on the full moon and new moon days, the Buddha would teach the assembled monastics and lay followers. Often enough, such lay followers would question the Buddha on various matters, and he would admonish them accordingly. There are also a number of very wise lay teachers, such as the layman Citta,<sup>44</sup> and the laywoman Visākhā,<sup>45</sup> who teach the monastics themselves or assist them in some legal matters.<sup>46</sup>

Occasionally, those outside the teaching (such as brahmins and wanderers) would question or debate with the Buddha.<sup>47</sup> The Buddha would skilfully answer them so that they are able to see their inner goodness and convert.<sup>48</sup> On such occasions, we see the Buddha using his skilful means on the teaching or spiritual levels [3]. So far, we have been examining the Buddha's skilful means from a historical or social perspective.

## 2.2.8 The historical skilful means

We know that all this [2.2.6.3] occurs within the first 2 years of the ministry. After the Buddha has taught the 5 monks and their awakening as arhats, they spend the 1<sup>st</sup> rains in the deer park at Isī,patana, near Benares.<sup>49</sup> The **Vinaya** records that the Buddha spends another rains at Rāja,gaha before proceeding to visit Kapila,vatthu.<sup>50</sup> All the events mentioned here occur between the 1<sup>st</sup> year and the Buddha's de-

<sup>42</sup> *Mayham añña, titthiyā samaṇa, brāhmaṇa, paribbājakā*, alt tr: "my recluses, brahmins and wandering ascetics, those of other religions."

<sup>43</sup> In terms of our own times, it would be disastrous for society if such good and intelligent people were to be under the control of moneytheistic monastics and cult gurus who would exploit their talents the wrong way and hasten the decline of the Dharma. See Bad friendship, SD 64.17 (3).

<sup>44</sup> See Citta Saṃyutta (S 41.1-10/4:281-304).

<sup>45</sup> See Jaṭila S (S 3.11/1:77-79), SD 14.11 (1) & (Nattā) Visākhā S (U 8.8/91 f), SD 40.4.

<sup>46</sup> See the case of the nun, mother of Kumāra Kassapa, found pregnant after she is ordained, which is wisely judged by the lady Visākhā (DhA 12.4/3:144-148).

<sup>47</sup> See eg Udumbarikā Sīha,nāda S (D 25/3:36-57), SD 1.4 & Mahā Vaccha,gotts S (M 73/1:489-497), SD 27.4.

<sup>48</sup> See eg Aṅguli,māla S (M 86/2:97-105), SD 5.11 & Upāli S (M 56/1:371-387), SD 27.1.

<sup>49</sup> Mv 1.13.1 = V 1:22; BA 3. It should be noted that the rains retreat as a monastic institution has not been introduced yet, but it is naturally difficult to travel during the three to four rainy months. The Vinaya later records how the order grow so big in Rāja,gaha that the area is crowded with monks so that the people complain. As a result, the Buddha decides to leave for a tour of the Deccan (*dakkhiṇa,giri*) area (Mv 1.53.1 = V 1:79).

<sup>50</sup> Mv 1.53.1 = V 1:82 f; J 1:85-94. The Jātaka's Nidāna Kathā, however says that the Buddha spends the first rains at Isī,patana (Sarnath). Then he goes to Uruvelā, staying there for 3 months, after which he stays in Rāja,gaha for 2 months. Then he leaves for Kapila,vatthu, arriving there after a 2-month journey, teaching along the way (J 1:82, 85). The Chinese text, 方廣大莊嚴經 (Fāng guǎngdà zhuāngyán jīng) fasc 7, says that the Buddha, after 6 years in ascetic practices, attains awakening (T3.187.582a18). 方廣大莊嚴經卷 (Fāng guǎngdà zhuāngyán jīng) adds that 6 years later, he meets his father again: "Twelve years after his renunciation, they met again." (T3.614a, 616a). 佛說

parture from Rāja,gaha.<sup>51</sup> **The Buddha,vaṃsa Commentary** says that the Buddha spends a total of 3 consecutive rains (that is, the second, third and fourth rains) in the Bamboo Grove donated by the rajah Bimbisāra (BA 3).

So far, we have examined how the Buddha, through his compassion and wisdom, connected with the society of his times. Through his own skilful use of language, he similarly encourages his followers to do that same,<sup>52</sup> so that the Dharma is clearly understood and experienced as what it really is. To ensure that the monastics fully benefit from the holy life, he introduces some basic rules for community life and wholesome interaction with society. These principles were later systematically formulated into the Vinaya as we have them today.

### 3 Skilful means in the Pali Canon

#### 3.1 THE 3 KINDS OF SKILLS

**3.1.1** From our survey so far, looking at the Buddha's use of skilful means in a social sense, we may have the impression that "skilful means" as a topic is not mentioned in the early texts. As we have seen, some leading scholars actually had this misconception [1.2]. In fact, the term, "skilful means" (*upāya kosalla*), does occur in the Pali Canon, in **the Saṅgīti Sutta** (D 33), as the third of the 3 kinds of skills (*ti kosalla*):

(1) skill in growth	<i>āya,kosalla</i>	
(2) skill in loss [decline]	<i>apāya,kosalla</i>	
(3) skill in means	<i>upāya,kosalla</i>	(D 33,1.10(54)/3:220)

**3.1.2** The Dīgha Commentary simply glosses *aya* as "growth" (*vuḍḍhi*), *apāya* as "lack of growth" (*avuḍḍhi*), and *upāya* as "cause" (*kāraṇa*) (DA 3:1004). The Vibhaṅga and its Commentary, **the Sammoha,vinodanī**, is more helpful, as they give more details. **The Vibhaṅga** defines the three kinds of skills as follows:

**771.** (1) Therein what is "skill in growth" (*āya,kosalla*)?

In paying attention to these states,

un arisen *unwholesome* states do not arise, and  
arisen unwholesome states are abandoned.

Furthermore, in paying attention to these states,

un arisen wholesome states arise, and  
arisen wholesome states he increases, makes abundant, cultivates, and brings to perfection.

Therein, that which is **wisdom** is understanding (*pajānana*), investigation (*vicaya*), research (*pavicaya*), investigation of truth (*dhamma,vicaya*), discernment (*sallakkhaṇa*), discrimination (*upalakkhaṇa*), differentiation (*paccupalakkhaṇa*), erudition (*paṇḍicca*), skill (*kosalla*), subtlety (*nepuñña*), analysis (*vebhavyā*), thought (*cintā*), breadth (*upaparikkhā*), wide wisdom (*bhūrī,medhā*), guidance (*pariṇāyika*), insight (*vipassanā*), circumspection (*sampajañña*), goad (*patoda*), wisdom (*paññā*), faculty of wisdom (*paññ'indriya*), power of wisdom (*paññā bala*), sword of wisdom (*paññā,sattha*), tower of wisdom (*paññā,pāsāda*),

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十二遊經 (Fó shuō shí'èr yóu jīng) says that the Buddha leaves home at 29, gains awakening at 35, and meets his father again after 12 more years (T4.195.146c29-14a1). (Nakamura 2000:327, 479 n50, with corrections.)

<sup>51</sup> Buddha,vaṃsa Comy records that the Buddha again returns to Rāja,gaha for his rains retreat during the 17<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> years (BA 3). BA however does not record the Buddha's rains retreat beyond that.

<sup>52</sup> See eg Araṇa Vibhaṅga S (M 139/3:230-236), SD 7.8.

light of wisdom (*paññā, āloka*), radiance of wisdom (*paññā, obhāsa*), torch of wisdom (*paññā, pajjota*), jewel of wisdom (*paññā, ratana*),  
 non-delusion (*amoho*), truth investigation (*dhamma, vacaya*), right view (*sammā, diṭṭhi*).  
 This is called “the skill in growth.”

(2) Therein what is “**skill regarding decline**” (*apāya, kosalla*)?

In paying attention to these states,

un arisen *wholesome* states do not arise, and  
 arisen wholesome states are abandoned.

Furthermore, in paying attention to these states,

un arisen unwholesome states arise, and  
 arisen unwholesome states he increases, makes abundant, cultivates, and brings to  
 perfection.

Therein, that which is **wisdom** is understanding (*pajānana*), ...

non-delusion (*amoho*), truth investigation (*dhamma, vacaya*), right view (*sammā, diṭṭhi*).

This is called “the skill in growth.”

(3) All the wisdom in the means (*upāya*) here is “**skill in means [skilful means]**” (*upāya, kosalla*).  
 (Vbh 771/325 f)

**3.1.3** The Vibhaṅga Commentary explains the above passage as follows:

**2086.** In the description of *āya, kosala* (Vbh 325,32) and so on, where *āya* means “growth” (*vuḍḍhi*): it is twofold, as the lessening of harm and the arising of benefit. *Āpaya* means “lack of growth [decline]” (*avuddhi*): it is twofold, too, as the lessening of benefit and the arising of harm. Therefore, *ime dhamme manasikaroto* (“from paying attention to these states”) is said to show that.

*Idaṁ vuccati* (“this is called”) means that which is understanding concerning the non-arising and abandoning of these unwholesome states, and the arousing and maintaining of these wholesome states—this is called “skill in growth” (*āya, kosalla*).

But that which is understanding concerning the non-arising and ending of wholesome states, and the arousing and maintenance of unwholesome states, is called “skill in decline” (*āpaya, kosalla*). This is the meaning.

**2087.** Let wisdom be your skill in growth! How does “skill in decline” come to be called wisdom?

Only one who is wise knows, “By paying attention thus, un arisen wholesome states do not arise, and those which have arisen cease; un arisen unwholesome states arise, and those which have arisen increase.”

Knowing thus, he does not allow un arisen unwholesome states to arise, and he abandons those that have arisen; he arouses un arisen profitable<sup>53</sup> states, and those that have arisen he cultivates to perfection. Thus should wisdom regarding “the skill in decline” be understood, too.

**2088.** *Sabbā pi tat’upāyā paññā upāya, kosalam* (Vbh 326,11), “All the wisdom in the means therein is skilful means.” But this should be understood as the purpose of remedying an extraordinary [urgent] task or danger that has arisen on account of understanding the cause for arising of that situation.<sup>54</sup>

As for the rest, the meaning is quite clear throughout.

(VbhA 414)

<sup>53</sup> VbhA:Ñ (1991) 161,3 errs in rendering it here as “unprofitable.”

<sup>54</sup> *Idaṁ pana accāyika, kicce vā bhaye vā uppanne tassa tikicchan’attham tñān’uppattiya, kāraṇa, jānana, vase-n’eva vedittabbarā.*

**3.1.4** The 3 kinds of skill (*ti,kosalla*), despite its title, are actually a canonical definition of skilful means (*upāya kosalla*), given as the third kind of skill. The first two factors are the two aspects of skilful means, that is, the positive aspect (mastering right effort) and the negative aspects (understanding wrong effort). And skilful means proper is the wisdom that such a mastery and understanding entail.

### 3.2 RIGHT EFFORT

**3.2.1** More fully, **skilful means**, therefore, is defined as rightly understanding what right effort and wrong effort are, and applying wisdom in all its wholesome form in the form of the four right efforts (*cattāro samma-p, padhāna*), thus:

(1) preventing unarisen evil	the effort to prevent	( <i>saṁvara padhāna</i> );
(2) abandoning arisen evil	the effort to abandon	( <i>pahāna padhāna</i> );
(3) cultivating good	the effort to cultivate	( <i>bhāvanā padhāna</i> );
(4) maintaining good	the effort to maintain	( <i>anurakkhaṇā padhāna</i> ).

More fully, the discourses define these four right efforts as follows:

Bhikshus, there are these four right exertions. What are the four?

(1) Here, bhikshus, a monk brings forth desire for the non-arising (*saṁvara*) of unarisen evil unwholesome states. He makes an effort, rouses energy, applies his mind and strives.

(2) Here, bhikshus, a monk brings forth desire for the abandoning (*pahāna*) of arisen evil unwholesome states. He makes an effort, rouses energy, applies his mind and strives.

(3) Here, bhikshus, a monk brings forth desire for the arising (*bhāvanā*) of unarisen wholesome states. He makes an effort, rouses energy, applies his mind and strives.

(4) Here, bhikshus, a monk brings forth desire for the maintenance [guarding] (*anurakkhaṇa*) of arisen wholesome states. He makes an effort, rouses energy, applies his mind and strives.

These, bhikshus, are the four right exertions.

(D 3:221; M 2:11; S 5:244; A 4.13/2:15, 4.14/2:16 f, 4.69/2:74; Vbh 208; cf A 4.14/2:16 f)

**3.2.2** The longer definition of the 4 right efforts is found in **the (Cattāro) Padhāna Sutta** (A 4.14), where it clearly shows that they are meant to be applied to mental training and meditation.<sup>55</sup> The *methodology* given in the Sutta for the 4 right efforts is as follows (including some new strategies):<sup>56</sup>

(1) preventing unarisen evil	understanding the five mental hindrances <sup>57</sup> & sense-restraint; <sup>58</sup>
(2) abandoning arisen evil	perceptions of impermanence, <sup>59</sup> and of foulness; <sup>60</sup> diligence;
(3) cultivating good	understanding and practising the seven awakening-factors; <sup>61</sup> [4.3]
(4) maintaining good	wise attention, <sup>62</sup> and spiritual friendship. <sup>63</sup>

(D 33,1.11(10)/3:225 f = A 4.14/2:16 f), SD 10.2

<sup>55</sup> A 4.14/2:16 f, SD 10.2.

<sup>56</sup> See Bodhi, *The Noble Eightfold Path*, Wheel 308-311, Kandy, 1984:70-82.

<sup>57</sup> See *Pañca, nīvaraṇa*, SD 32.1.

<sup>58</sup> See *Nimitta* and *Anuvyañjana*, SD 19.14.

<sup>59</sup> See the 10 discourses of the Okkanta Saṃyutta (S 25), the first of which is (Anicca) Cakkhu S (S 25.1/3:225), SD 16.7.

<sup>60</sup> That is, reflecting on the unattractive aspects of the object (thought).

<sup>61</sup> See (Bojjhaṅga) Sīla S (S 46.3/5:67-70), SD 10.15.

<sup>62</sup> See *Nimitta* and *Anuvyañjana*, SD 19.14.



**3.2.3** All such spiritual exercises have one goal, that of establishing right view and upgrading it finally to the supramundane level so that we are liberated. In other words, the Buddha's skilful means, as we have noted, is always associated with wisdom (*sabbâpi tat rūpāyā paññā upāya, kosallaṃ*, DA 3:1005). Buddhist skilful means, as is often understood, is also closely linked with compassion (eg *mahā, karuṇā upāya, -kosallaṃ ca*, CA 289), which we shall now examine.

### 3.3 KNOWLEDGE AND CONDUCT

**3.3.1** From our survey of canonical teachings related to skilful means so far, it is clear that it has to do with wisdom (*paññā*). Now, we need to examine the early Buddhist conception of wisdom, and we will see that the ancient texts invariably speak of the intrinsic link between spiritual knowledge and moral conduct (*vijjā, carāṇa*), that wisdom necessarily and naturally entails moral virtue. So vital and close is this link, that the Buddha himself is said to be "accomplished in knowledge and conduct" (*vijjā, carāṇa, -sampanno*).<sup>64</sup>

**The Soṇa,daṇḍa Sutta** (D 4) highlights this inextricable link between moral virtue (or moral conduct) and wisdom. The brahmin Soṇa,daṇḍa makes this statement, which is endorsed by the Buddha:

"For moral virtue, master Gotama, is purified by wisdom; wisdom purified by wisdom.  
Where there is moral virtue, there is wisdom. Where there is wisdom, there is moral virtue.  
For the morally virtuous, there is wisdom; for the wise, there is moral virtue.  
And moral virtue and wisdom are declared to be foremost in the world.  
Master Gotama, just as one might wash one hand with the other, or one foot with the other, even so, wisdom is fully washed by moral virtue, moral virtue is fully washed by wisdom.  
Where there is moral virtue, there is wisdom; where there is wisdom, there is moral virtue.  
One who has moral virtue has wisdom; one who has wisdom, has moral virtue. Moral virtue and wisdom are declared to be foremost in the world."  
**22** "So it is, brahmin.  
Indeed, brahmin, moral virtue is purified by wisdom; wisdom purified by wisdom.  
Where there is moral virtue, there is wisdom. Where there is wisdom, there is moral virtue.  
For the morally virtuous, there is wisdom; for the wise, there is moral virtue.  
And moral virtue and wisdom are declared to be foremost in the world."

(D 4,21-22/1:124), SD 30.5

**3.3.2** The early Buddhist conception of skilful means is wisdom (*paññā, vijjā*) and moral virtue (*sīla*) in action through compassion (*karuṇā*). Here, compassion is what moves the Buddha (and should move us) in applying a skilful mean. **Wisdom** is the "skilful" aspect where the Buddha naturally knows *what* to teach or do to uplift a person or his audience spiritually: this is a *situational* skill. On a simple level, this is discerned by the careful thought, "What do I best do now?"<sup>65</sup> **Moral virtue** is *how* the Buddha compassionately acts (or how we should compassionately act) without intentionally harming self, nor other, nor any other party.<sup>66</sup> This is the golden rule in action.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>63</sup> S 5:2-30; A 1:14-18; It 10. See Meghiya S (A 9.3/4:354-358 ≈ U 4.1/34-37), SD 34.2 (2.1); Upakkilesa S (M 128,8-13/3:155-157), SD 5.18. See Spiritual friendship, SD 8.1; also Piya Tan, *The Buddha and His Disciples*, 2004 ch 5 (on Sāriputta & Moggallāna).

<sup>64</sup> This is the *third* of the Buddha's 9 virtues: see *Buddhānussati*, SD 15.7.

<sup>65</sup> See Alabbhanīya Thāna S (a 5.48/3:54-56), SD 42.1

<sup>66</sup> Eg "Let one not destroy life, nor cause to kill, | nor approve of killing by others; | Laying aside the rod [violence] toward all beings, both the still and the moving in the world" (Sn 394).

**3.3.3** As such, in early Buddhism, skilful means is *not* the action of wisdom *and* compassion (as two separate components), but of wisdom *with* compassion (in an integral manner). For compassion is inherent *both* in wisdom and in moral virtue. For, we cannot be truly wise without moral virtue, and we cannot be truly virtuous without wisdom.

**3.3.4** To be wise is to be able to relate self with others: “Just as this is, so is that. Just as that is, so is this.”<sup>68</sup> And we are truly morally virtuous only when this is done out of compassion for others, that is, when we no more see a distance or difference between self and other, mine and yours. In this sense, skilful means is the *selflessly virtuous* working of wisdom *with* compassion. The necessity and merit of this deliberate exercise in defining skilful means will be apparent when we discuss how skilful means is generally viewed in Mahāyāna [5-7].

**3.4 OCCASIONS FOR SKILFUL MEANS.** We will now look at some examples of skilful means used by the Buddha. We shall group them into three kinds of skilful means, that is, of body [3.4.1], of speech [3.4.2], and of mind [3.4.3]. It should be noted that in all such examples, the dynamics underlying the skilful means is that of instruction (*anusāsana*), that is, converting the other party to the Dharma, even to awakening itself.

### **3.4.1 Skilful means of body**

**3.4.1.1 THE “TIRING” THAT INSPIRE SAMVEGA.** There are a number of occasions when the Buddha uses his physical body, as it were, to instruct the audience. We shall look at two of the best known examples of such skilful means, that is, the conversions of Āṅguli,māla, of Vakkali, and of Kisā Gotamī. Both these stories show how the Buddha “tires out” (*kilamati*) the person, which is the commentarial narrator’s expression for inspiring samvega in him.<sup>69</sup>

(A) **ĀṅGULI,MĀLA’S CONVERSION.** The conversion of the serial killer, the bandit Āṅgulimāla, is recorded in detail in **the Āṅguli,māla Sutta** (M 86). The discourse records how the bandit, seeing the Buddha, stalks him, and then runs after him to attack him, but the Buddha is always some distance ahead of Āṅgulimāla. Each time, when he thinks he has reached the Buddha, he finds himself to be behind him, *the earth seems to have turned around*, as it were. Physically exhausted and befuddled by his inability to reach up to the Buddha (that is, his state of “tiring,” *kilamana,bhāva*),<sup>70</sup> Āṅgulimāla shouts at the Buddha, telling him to “stop.”

The Buddha then turns around to face Āṅgulimāla and says these “**earth-turning**” words: “I have stopped, Āṅgulimāla! You stop, too!” (*ñhito ahaṃ Āṅgulimāla, tvaṃ tiṭṭhā ti*).<sup>71</sup> Āṅgulimāla is totally shaken up now, caught in a limbo between the virtual reality of being a serial killer and spiritual realiza-

<sup>67</sup> “What is undesirable and disagreeable to me is undesirable and disagreeable to others, too. How can I inflict upon another what is undesirable and disagreeable to me?”: Veḷu,dvāreyya S (S 55.7/5:352-356), SD 1.5; also Dh 129 f.

<sup>68</sup> *Yathā idaṃ tathā etaṃ, yathā etaṃ tathā idaṃ* (Sn 203 = Thā 396): this is the “specific conditionality” (*idappaccayatā*) formula applied externally; see Dependent Arising, SD 5.16 (2.2a). Cf “Thus, as I am, so you are; as you are, so am I” (*iti yādiso ahaṃ, tādiso tvaṃ; yādiso tvaṃ, tādiso ahaṃ*), Āḷāra Kālāma says of the Bodhisattva, inviting him to lead his community (Ariya,pariyesanā S, M 36.15c/1:165), SD 1.11.

<sup>69</sup> In Vakkali’s conversion [3.4.1.2(B)], the high point is when the Buddha notices that he “tiring” (*sattā tassa kilamana,bhāvaṃ ñatvā*, DhA 4:118). Here *kilamana* can be taken as a synonym for *saṃvega* (spiritual urgency): see Mahā Parinibbāna S (D 16), SD 9 (7f).

<sup>70</sup> See n at 3.4.1.1 Intro.

<sup>71</sup> See Miracles, SD 27.5a (7.1.2).

tion. While Aṅguli,māla uses the word “stop” in a worldly or conventional sense, the Buddha, using the same word, opens up Aṅguli,māla’s mind to the level of liberation.

There are actually two skilful means at work here. The first is that of the body, that is, the Buddha’s ability to stay out of Aṅguli,māla’s reach, which confuses him because he has always been able to outrun his victims. Secondly, the clincher, is the use of Dharma language, or, more specifically, **the intentional language**<sup>72</sup> the Buddha uses to raise or sublimate Aṅguli,māla’s consciousness. On account of the Buddha’s skilful instruction, Aṅguli,māla attains streamwinning, becomes a monk and in due course gains arhathood.<sup>73</sup>

(B) KISĀ GOTAMĪ’S CONVERSION. The most moving account of the Buddha’s skilful means of body is arguably the conversion of Kisā Gotamī (Lean Gotamī). Her concern for her status in a society that places a premium in a woman looking healthy and beautiful, and being fruitful, is devastated when her only child dies. She falls into psychological denial of her loss, and wanders about seeking a cure for her dead child.

The Buddha instructs her to fetch him a handful of mustard seeds, but *it must come from a house where no one has died*. As she goes from house to house throughout the city, the message of impermanence and death is echoed and re-echoed into her being. At the end of her Sisyphean quest, physically exhausted but spiritual awakened,<sup>74</sup> her unconscious defence of denial is raised into consciousness, so that she becomes aware of the true state of things: death is universal.

She goes into the forest and leaves her dead baby in the charnel ground, and returns to the only person who has opened her eyes to true reality. She joins the order as a nun and in due course becomes an arhat.<sup>75</sup>

### 3.4.1.2 THE BUDDHA’S SPECIAL APPEARANCES.

(A) THE 8 ASSEMBLIES. One of the best known examples of the Buddha’s skilful means in bodily action for the sake of teaching the Dharma, is his appearances before the 8 assemblies (*aṭṭha parisa*), as recounted in **the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16), thus:

#### 3.21 <sup>76</sup>Now, Ānanda, there are these eight assemblies?

What are the eight?

- (1) The kshatriya assembly [noble class],
- (2) the brahmin assembly [priestly class],
- (3) the householder assembly,
- (4) the recluse assembly,
- (5) the assembly of the 4 great kings,
- (6) the assembly of the 32 gods,
- (7) Māra’s assembly, and
- (8) the assembly of Brahmās.

<sup>72</sup> See SD 26.11 (6.5); **Dh 97**, SD 10.6 esp (5); also Piya Tan, “Teaching methods of the Buddha,” Singapore, 2002 ch 18. Download from <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/Teaching-Methods-of-the-Buddha.pdf>.

<sup>73</sup> M 86/2:97-105 @ SD 5.11.

<sup>74</sup> This is her state of “tiring” (*kilamāna, bhāva*) or samvega: see n at 3.4.1.1 Intro.

<sup>75</sup> See Kisā Gotamī, SD 43.2 & Miracles, SD 27.5a (8.6.3).

<sup>76</sup> These sections are also in Parisa S (A 8.69/4:307 f) and nearly identical to a passage in Maha Sīhanāda S (M 12,29/1:72).

**3.22** Ānanda, I recall having approached a kshatriya assembly of many hundreds, assembled with them before, and conversed with them before, and engaged in discussion with them before. Whatever their colour was then, so was my colour, too. Whatever was their voice then, so was my voice, too. I instructed, inspired, roused and gladdened them with Dharma talk.

But even as I was speaking, they knew me not, wondering, “Who could this be who speaks? A deva or a human?”

And having instructed, inspired, roused and gladdened them with Dharma talk, I disappeared. And when I have disappeared, they wondered, “Who is this who has disappeared? A deva or a human?” (D 16,3.21-23/2:110 f), SD 9

The same is then said for each of the other seven kinds of assembly. Although this is apparently an account of a psychic display or miraculous appearance to teach the Dharma, we may also take it as an account of *a skilful means of the body* for the purpose of effectively admonishing a non-Buddhist assembly.<sup>77</sup> This is an example of a skilful teaching method of the Buddha, that is, to wholesomely interact at the level of the audience. We could describe it in Rhys Davids’ words in terms of demythologization, as follows:

When speaking on sacrifice to a sacrificial priest, on union with God to an adherent of the current theology, on Brahman claims to superior social rank to a proud Brahman, on mystic insight to a man who trusts in it, on the soul to one who believes in the soul theory, the method followed is always the same. Gotama puts himself as far as possible in the mental position of the questioner. (D:RD 1899 1: 206 f) [1.1]

(B) VAKKALI’S CONVERSION. The young man Vakkali falls in love with the Buddha’s physical beauty, and becomes a monk just to spend his time gazing at the Buddha. When the Buddha enters into the rains retreat, Vakkali despairs at not seeing the Buddha for the three months of the retreat. Out of depression and desperation, he decides to throw himself off Mt Vulture Peak.<sup>78</sup> At that moment, the Buddha sends forth a radiant image or hologram of himself,<sup>79</sup> pronouncing, “Come, Vakkali! Fear not ... I will free you!” Even while in mid-air, Vakkali suppresses his intense joy and reflecting on the Buddha’s words, becomes a full-fledged arhat, and descends to the ground.

This is one of the rare stories where the Buddha comes close to the Mahāyāna notion of skilful means where compassion apparently over-rides moral virtue.<sup>80</sup> In his great compassion, the Buddha closely monitors Vakkali’s mental state, and at the right moment, heals him forever of his lustful fever. The Buddha, skilfully interceding just at the right time, enables Vakkali to completely let go of *his mentally constructed Buddha*, an object of his desire, so that he meets the true Buddha, and so becomes an arhat.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>77</sup> The miraculous tone of this record was probably the work of the reciters, who had dramatized it to hold the attention of the Indian audience during the recital of this Sutta. Cf Lotus Sutra, ch 25 [5.3].

<sup>78</sup> As in other dramatic intercessions of the Buddha, such as the conversions of Aṅgulimāla and of Kisā Gotamī [3.4.1.1], the high point is when the Buddha notices the person state of “tiring” (*satthā tassa kilamana, bhāvaṃ ñātvā*, DhA 4:118). Here *kilamana* can be taken as a synonym for *saṃvega* (spiritual urgency): see Mahā Parinibbāna S (D 16), SD 9 (7f).

<sup>79</sup> *Attānaṃ dassetuṃ obhāsaṃ muñci*, “he projected [emitted] a radiance to show himself” (DhA 4:118; J 5:289).

<sup>80</sup> This story is actually commentarial. The canonical accounts lack any such angle.

<sup>81</sup> Vakkali Thera Vatthu (DhA 25.11/4:118 f), SD 8.8; cf Vakkali S (S 22.87/3:119-124), SD 8.8; also Ap 2:465 f; AA 1:248-251; ThīA 2:146-150; Vism 4.45/129. See also Miracles, SD 27.5a (7.1.1).

**3.4.2 Skilful means of speech.** The most common skilful means of the Buddha understandably is that of speech, especially in teaching. The Buddha's teaching dynamics always works in two ways: to gladden the audience and to prepare the listener or audience for liberation.

**3.4.2.1 GLADDENING THE AUDIENCE.** In **the Alagaddûpama Sutta** (M 22), the Buddha says, "Bhikshus, both before<sup>82</sup> and now what I teach is *suffering and the ending of suffering*."<sup>83</sup> The ending of suffering is of course joyful. In fact, joy is always a natural part of the Buddha's teaching, as evident from **the Bahu,-vedaniya Sutta** (M 59):

Ānanda, when the Dharma has been shown thus by me in a relative manner, it may be expected that there are those who would approve of, or allow, or rejoice in what is well said, well spoken, by others, such that they would dwell in concord, rejoicing in one another, without disputing, blending like milk and water, looking at one another with loving eyes.

(M 59,5.2/1:398), SD 30.4<sup>84</sup>

Elsewhere, especially at the end of an alms-offering, the Buddha would give thanks by way of a Dharma instruction, as shown in this stock passage:

Then the Blessed One instructed, inspired, roused and gladdened him with a Dharma talk,<sup>85</sup> rose from his seat and departed. (D 4,27/1:127, 16,3.21-23/2:109 f; S 47.10,4/5:154)

This action sequence reflects the basic structure of the Buddha's teaching method:

- |   |                              |
|---|------------------------------|
| (1) the Dharma is shown                       | ( <i>sandassetvā</i> );      |
| (2) the listener/s are filled with enthusiasm | ( <i>samādapetvā</i> );      |
| (3) they are fired with commitment            | ( <i>samuttejetvā</i> ); and |
| (4) filled with joy                           | ( <i>sampahamsetvā</i> ).    |

The Commentaries explain that

by <u>instructing</u> him,	the Buddha dispels the listener's <i>delusion</i> ;
by <u>inspiring</u> him,	<i>heedlessness</i> is dispelled;
by <u>rousing</u> him,	<i>indolence</i> is dispelled; and
by <u>gladdening</u> ,	brings the practice to a <i>conclusion</i> . (DA 1:300; UA 242; SnA 446)

In short, when we teach Dharma to benefit others, we should do our best to *bring instruction, inspiration, motivation and joy* to the listener. These four qualities are, in fact, the sixth or last of the ideal skills of a Dharma speaker, as stated in **the (Dhamma,desaka) Udāyi Sutta** (A 3:184).<sup>86</sup>

<sup>82</sup> Comy: That is, from as early as the first discourse given under the Bodhi tree (S 5:420-424/56.11, V 1:10-12).

<sup>83</sup> M 22.38/1:140, SD 3.13. This important statement, also made to Anurādha (Anurādha S, S 22.86/3:119), refers back to §37. Here the Buddha in effect declares that a living being has no self but is a mere aggregate of factors, material and mental events, connected by a process that is inherently *dukkha*, and that nirvana, the ending of *dukkha*, is not the annihilation of being but the termination of that very same *dukkha* process. This statement should read in conjunction with Kaccāna, gotta S (S 2:17/12.15 = 3:134 f/22.90, SD 6.13), where the Buddha says that one with right view, who has discarded all the doctrines of a self, sees that whatever arises is only *dukkha* arising, and whatever ceases is only *dukkha* ceasing. (See M:ÑB 2001:1211 n267)

<sup>84</sup> For a more elaborate context, see Dhamma, cetiya S (M 89,11/2:120 f), SD 64.10; see also Spiritual friendship: A textual study, SD 34.1 (3.2.3).

<sup>85</sup> "Having instructed, ... and gladdened them," *dhammiyā kathāya sandassetvā samādapetvā samuttejetvā sampahamsetvā*.

However, when this happiness is only of a worldly level, it is not an end in itself, but serves as the basis or precursor for a higher liberating Dharma (which we now will examine).

**3.4.2.2 PREPARING THE AUDIENCE FOR LIBERATION.** A good teacher prepares his students well for the lesson, and they fully benefit from the teaching. The Buddha does this using the graduated teaching or progressive talk (*ānupubbī,kathā*). The **Upāli Sutta** (M 56) records how the Buddha gives the houselord Upāli a progressive talk, followed by a teaching on 4 *noble truths*, resulting in Upāli becoming a stream-winner, thus:

Then the Blessed One gave the houselord Upāli a **progressive talk**—that is to say, he spoke on giving (*dāna*), on moral virtue (*sīla*) and on the heavens (*sagga*); and explained the danger, the vanity and disadvantages of sense-pleasure (*kām’ādīnava*), and the advantages of renunciation (*nekkhamm’ānisaṃsa*).

When the Blessed One knew that the houselord [380] Upāli’s **mind was prepared, pliant, free from obstacles, elevated and lucid**, then he explained to him the teaching peculiar to the Buddhas,<sup>87</sup> that is to say, suffering, its arising, its cessation, and the path.<sup>88</sup>

And just as a clean cloth, with all its stains removed, would take dye,<sup>89</sup> even so, in the houselord Upāli, while right there on his seat, there arose the dust-free stainless Dharma-eye [vision of truth],<sup>90</sup> thus:

“What is of the nature of arising, all that is of the nature of ending.”	<i>Yaṃ kiñci samudaya,dhammaṃ sabbantaṃ nirodha,dhammaṃ ti.</i>
---	---

Then, the houselord Upāli, (is one) who has seen the Dharma [truth],<sup>91</sup> won the Dharma, knew the Dharma, plunged into the Dharma, crossed over doubt, abandoned uncertainty, who has gained moral courage [intrepidity]<sup>92</sup> in the Teacher’s teaching, independent of others, ...<sup>93</sup>  
(M 56,18/1:380 f), SD 27.1

<sup>86</sup> A 5.159/3:184 (SD 46.1).

<sup>87</sup> *Buddhānaṃ sāmukkaṃsikaṃ desanā*.

<sup>88</sup> This is stock: V 1:15, 2:156, 192; D 1:110, 148, 2:41; M 1:379; A 3:184, 4:186, 209; U 49.

<sup>89</sup> See Vatthūpama S (M 7,2/1:36), SD 28.12.

<sup>90</sup> *Evam eva upālissa gahapatissa tasmim yeva āsane virajam vīta,malam dhamma,cakkhum udapādi*. Comy says that here, the “Dharma-eye” (*dhamma,cakkhu*) is the path of streamwinning (MA 3:92): in Brahmāyu S (M 91,36/2:145), it refers to the 3 paths (*tiṇṇaṃ maggānaṃ*) (ie culminating in non-return); in Cūḷa Rāhul’ovāda S (M 147,9/3:280), the destruction of the influxes (*āsava-k,khaya*) (ie arhathood). The following sentence: “All that is subject to arising is subject to ending,” shows the mode in which the path arises. The path takes ending (nirvana) as its object, but its function is to penetrate all conditioned states as being subject to arising and ending.” (MA 3:92)

<sup>91</sup> “The truth” (*dhamma*) here refers to the 4 noble truths. Having seen the truth for himself, he cuts off the fetter of doubt and now has “the noble and liberating view that accordingly leads the practitioner to the complete destruction of suffering” (*yā’yaṃ diṭṭhi ariyā niyyānikā niyyāti tak,karassa sammā,dukkha-k,khayāya*, Kosambiya S, M 48,7/1:322)

<sup>92</sup> *Vesārajja*. Comy on Tha 289 defines “intrepidity” (*vesārajja*) as “with all the influxes completely destroyed, the teacher has no fear from any quarter” (*sabb’āsava,parikkhīṇaṃ satthāraṃ akuto,bhayaṃ*) (ThaA 2:122). Mahā Sīha,nāda S (M 12) says that there are 4 kinds of intrepidity, that is, no one can justly the Buddha that (1) his awakening is incomplete, (2) that he has not destroyed all the influxes, (3) that mental obstructions, as defined by the Buddha, do not obstruct them, and (4) that when he teaches the Dharma, it does not lead to the complete destruction of suffering (M 12,22-28/1:71 f), SD 49.1.



The Buddha's teaching method progresses from the known or more easily known (the nature and benefits of *bodily* action resulting in happiness), to *mental* benefits (letting go of the senses and living a contented life). All this serves to calm and clear the listener's mind, so that it is ready for the more difficult teaching that serves as a window into true reality, that is, the 4 noble truths. If the listener gains direct knowledge into the 4 noble truths, he would at least attain streamwinning, as Upāli is reported to have done here.<sup>94</sup>

### 3.4.3 Skilful means of mind

The most effective skilful means of the Buddha is surely that of *mind-reading*. One of the most famous of the Buddha's mind-readings is in connection with the conversion of the fire-worshipping matted hair ascetics, **Uruvelā Kassapa** and his two brothers. Nine months after his awakening, that is, during the first year of the ministry, the Buddha visits Kassapa at his ashram outside Uruvelā. Despite the Buddha's performing various psychic wonders (such taming a fierce serpent, parting the waters, etc) Kassapa is not impressed; that is, until finally the Buddha, *reading his mind*, tells him that he thinks himself an arhat, but the reality is that he is *not*. And so Kassapa is moved to awaken to true reality.<sup>95</sup>

Similarly, the Buddha would often survey his audience for those who are spiritually ready for seeing the Dharma. This passage from **the Kuṭṭhi Sutta** (U 5.3) describes the process:

Then the Blessed One, with his mind, surveyed the minds of all those in the assembly, wondering. "Who now here is able to understand the Dharma?" And the Blessed One saw Suppabuddha the leper seated in the assembly and, upon seeing him, it occurred to him, "This one here is able to understand the Dharma."  
(U 5.3/48 f), SD 70.4

Then the Buddha gives the progressive talk, followed in due course by the teaching on of the four noble truths, and just as in the case of Upāli, Suppabuddha the leper, too, becomes a streamwinner [3.4.2.1].<sup>96</sup>

Mind-reading, in the Buddha's case, would work in tandem with the second of three knowledges (*vijjā*), that is, the "divine eye" or knowledge of the death and rebirth of beings according to their karma.<sup>97</sup> A modern approximate of this would be some kind of "regression therapy." The rationale for such a skill or therapy is that much of our current state is conditioned by our past karma. As such, knowing what our past life or lives are would be helpful in uplifting our present life, or solving some persistent present difficulty.<sup>98</sup>

<sup>93</sup> *Atha kho kūtadanto brāhmaṇo diṭṭha, dhammo patta, dhammo vidita, dhammo pariyogāḷha, dhammo tiṇṇa, vicikiccho vigata, kathaṃ, katha vesāraja-p, patto apara-p, paccayo satthu, sāsane.* As at Ambaṭṭha S (D 3,2.21-22/-1:110); Kūtadanta S (D 1:150); Cūḷa Saccaka S (M 5/1:234 f x2); Upāli S (M 1:380); Mahā Vaccha, gotta S (M 1:491); Dīgha, nakha S (M 1:501); Brahmāyu S (M 2:145); Sīha S (A 4:186); Ugga S 1 (A 4:209); Ugga S 2 (A 4:214); Kuṭṭhi S (U 5.3/49).

<sup>94</sup> Further, on the 5 principles of teaching the Dharma to others, see SD 46.1 (4).

<sup>95</sup> See Uruvela Pāṭihāriya (Mv 1:15-21 = V 1:24-35), SD 63.2.

<sup>96</sup> For refs to mind-reading by the Buddha and by the early disciples, see Miracles, SD 27.5a (5.3.1).

<sup>97</sup> The 3 knowledges (*te, vijja*): (1) retrocognition (*pubbe, nivāsānussati, ñāṇa*), that is, the recollection of past lives; (2) the divine eye (*dibba, cakkhu*) or clairvoyance; and (3) the knowledge of the destruction of the mental influxes (*āsava-k, khaya, ñāṇa*), that ends rebirth. (D 3:281; M 1:34; A 1:255, 258, 3:17, 280, 4:421). See Tevijja S (D 13), SD 1.8 Intro 2.2.

<sup>98</sup> It should be noted however that the various forms of "regression therapy" are not an exact art (they are by no means even a science yet). At best, a past-life experience could *suggest* possible some past condition or conditions for our present state, but there are likely to be more such conditions, including the present life, that have moulded

### 3.4.4 Testimonies of skilful means

**3.4.4.1** The ancient texts record various testimonies of those who have benefitted from the Buddha's skilful means. A well known case is that of the love-stricken **Nanda**, half-brother of the Buddha, as recorded in **the Nanda Sutta** (U 3.2) and the Commentaries.

After becoming a monk, Nanda still harbours thoughts of his wife-to-be, the beautiful Janapada, kalyāṇī Nandā, and yearns to return to lay life. The Buddha, using his psychic power, transports Nanda to the Tāvātimsa heaven so that he sees five hundred divinely beautiful celestial nymphs there. When asked by the Buddha, Nanda admits that these nymphs are far more beautiful than even Janapada, kalyāṇī. The Buddha then promises he would win these 500 nymphs if he were to dedicate himself to the holy life. Nanda readily agrees.

On their return to Jetavana, the Buddha recounts the event to the eighty great disciples, and when they question Nanda, he feels greatly ashamed of his lustfulness. Mustering all his spiritual strength, he strives hard and, in no long time, becomes an arhat. Then he approaches the Buddha and absolves him of his promise.<sup>99</sup>

**3.4.4.2 The Nanda Thera, gāthā** (Tha 157 f) records Nanda's reflection and gratitude to the Buddha, thus:

<b>157</b>	<i>Ayoniso manasikārā, mañḍanaṃ anuyuñjisaṃ; uddhato capalo cāsiraṃ, kāma, rāgena aṭṭhito.</i>	Because of unwise attention. I was addicted to ornaments; I was conceited and vain, and afflicted by sensual lust.
<b>158</b>	<i>Upāya, kusalenāham, buddhenādiccabandhunā; yoniso paṭipajjitvā, bhava cittaṃ udabbahin ti</i>	On account of skilful means by the Buddha, Kinsman of the Sun, I, practising wisely, tore my mind out of existence. (Tha 157 f)

The Commentary explains the key phrase, *upāya, kusaleṇa ... buddhena*, as follows: "On account of the Buddha, the Lord, by his wisdom in the expertise of training those disposed to training" (*upāya, kusalenā ti vineyyānaṃ damanūpāya-c, chekena kovidena buddhena bhagavatā hetu, bhūtena*, ThaA 2:32). The key word is "disposed to training" (*vineyya*).

**3.4.4.3** We also have testimonies in the form of stories, that is, accounts of past events (such as the Jātakas). **The Kaṇha Peta, vatthu** (Pv 2.6) recounts how the Buddha, surveying the world, notices that a certain lay disciple, mourning the death of his son, is ready for attaining the fruit of streamwinning. Approaching the disciple, the Buddha, after asking after him, relates a Jātaka (past-life account) of the ten Kaṇha princes of Dvāravatī, the first of whom, was Vasu, deva.

Vasudeva, overcome by the grief at his son's death, neglects his royal duties. One of his younger brothers, Ghaṭa Paṇḍita (apparently the Bodhisattva himself), decides to heal his brother by resorting to a skilful means (*upāya kosalla*, Pv 99). He feigns madness and wandering the streets, began to ask for the hare in the moon.

**3.4.4.4** Learning of Ghaṭa Paṇḍita's ravings, the rajah Vasudeva approaches him and says that he (Ghaṭa Paṇḍita) is wasting away his sweet life looking for something impossible to obtain (namely, the

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us. Better than regression therapy is a combination of breath and lovingkindness meditations under the mentorship of an experienced teacher.

<sup>99</sup> U 3.2/21-24; UA 168-179; J 1:91, 182/2:92-94; DhA 1.9/117-123; SnA 273-275.

hare in the moon). It is then that Ghaṭa Paṇḍita points out to Vasudeva that, similarly, pining for a dead son and not living in the present, too, is to waste one's life away. Ghaṭa then admonishes Vasudeva with a discourse on impermanence and so heals him of his sorrows, saying,

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|--|--|
| <p><b>18</b>    <i>So'haṃ abbūḷha, sallo'smi</i><br/> <i>sīti, bhūto'smi nibbuto</i><br/> <i>no socāmi na rodāmi</i><br/> <i>tāva sutvāna bhāsitaṃ</i></p> | <p>Removed is the dart for me,<br/> cool am I, and cooled [extinguished],<br/> I neither sorrow nor weep,<br/> hearing your word.</p>                    |
| <p><b>19</b>    <i>Evaṃ karonti sappaññā</i><br/> <i>ye honti anukampakā</i><br/> <i>vinivattayati sokamhā</i><br/> <i>ghaṭo jeṭṭhaṃ'va bhātaraṃ</i></p>   | <p>So does this wise<br/> who, out of compassion,<br/> turn us away from grief,<br/> just as Ghāta did his eldest brother.    (Pv 2.6/19; PvA 93-99)</p> |

**3.4.4.5** In all our accounts of the Buddha acts of skilful means, we see that he is firstly, moved by *compassion* to lift other out of their sufferings, or using is *wisdom* to point out the right way to the lost. In other words, both wisdom and compassion are found in the Buddha who uses either of them as an effective tool in liberating other beings. Such skill means can range from something as mundane or simple as going about looking for a handful of mustard seeds (as in the case of Kisā Gotamī) or as complicated as carefully pointing out the error of a brahmin's wrong view as shown in many of the Dīgha Nikāya suttas. The general direction of skilful means is invariably that of going from what the subject *knows* (which is still limited or in error) to the *unknown* higher knowledge that is liberating. Skilful means, in other words, is simply, the Buddha interaction with every being he meets.

## 4 The Pāli suttas as literature

### 4.1 DHARMA TRANSMISSION.

#### 4.1.1 Theory and practice

It is almost impossible for us be fully certain what the Buddha *taught* because we have no ancient manuscripts or records of any kind going back to the Buddha's time. However, we do have what may be called the "mind-transmission" of his teachings handed down by the contemplative monks, especially the forest monks. Such monastic practitioners preserve the Buddha's meditation teachings and experiences in their person<sup>100</sup> and practice. The Buddha's teaching can never be fully understood, much less, its goal attained, without our experiencing some level of meditative stillness. We may never know what the Buddha *taught*, but with the still clarity of our meditative minds, we will be able to correctly understand through the Suttas, what the Buddha *teaches*. The Dharma is other words, is a living transmission.

When the pupil shows some level of maturity in both moral virtue and mental cultivation, he begins, with the teacher's help, to grow in wisdom (*paññā*). Even for the wisest teacher, he could at best give the pupil only a *theoretical* presentation of the teaching; but if the pupil is ready, he would digest this presentation and even at once see directly the true reality in it for himself. In such a case, the mature or awakened pupil would be accomplished in both knowledge and conduct (*vijjā, carāṇa*) [3.3], that is, wisdom with compassion, so that he is himself capable of using skilful means to uplift others.

*Teaching the Dharma* is the best interpersonal skilful means for transmitting and preserving the Dharma. When a teacher successfully teaches the Dharma in a proper manner, the joyful listener cultivates a level of attention and memory that enable him to preserve the Dharma in his mind. *Meditation*

<sup>100</sup> Assaji is a good example of a monk who protects or embodies the Dharma in his *body* [2.2.6.4].

is a personal skilful means which allows the student to further focus the teaching he has received, and to relate it to other teachings he has not yet understood or heard.

#### 4.1.2 The collected texts of the Dharma

What if we do not have a high level of meditation proficiency, or even none at all? Would we be able to understand what the Buddha teaches? Without some experience of proper meditation, the Buddhist teachings are at best *literature*. The oldest collection and most instructive canonical literature we have are found in the first 4 Nikāyas, that is,

the Dīgha Nikāya	the collection of long discourses,
the Majjhima Nikāya	the collection of the middle-length discourses,
the Saṃyutta Nikāya	the collection of the connected discourses, and
the Aṅguttara Nikāya	the collection of the numerical discourses.

The materials of the first 4 Nikāyas are skilfully arranged according to the intended audience. **The Dīgha Nikāya**, for example, presents the discourses, dialogues and debates of the Buddha *in a broad and dramatic manner* mostly to attract non-Buddhists. The long discourses are skilfully presented as a prospectus for a university course, as it were. **The Majjhima Nikāya** is made up of further dialogues of the Buddha, some of them even longer than those of the Dīgha, but the Majjhima discourses are intended to inspire *the monastics and the faithful* to appreciate and practise the spirit of the Dharma. **The Saṃyutta Nikāya** arranges Buddhist teachings into *connected* chapters and sets, that is, there is less narrative but more instructions here. **The Aṅguttara Nikāya** arranges sutta materials in a *numerical* manner, which would be easier for the laity (for whom it is clearly intended) to appreciate, so that they are inspired towards more committed Dharma practice.<sup>101</sup>

#### 4.2 THE DHARMA IS BETTER HEARD THAN READ

**4.2.1** A special characteristic of the discourses or texts in these collections is that they tend to be very repetitive or cyclic in a number of ways. They are, however, not merely repetitive, but are patterned like a computer programme. For example, there are *recursions* or recursive sequences (where a template, say, for the 5 aggregates, is used, and each template describes or defines one aggregate at a time),<sup>102</sup> *concatenations* or concatenated series (where the template or passages mention an additional word or expression each time incrementally),<sup>103</sup> and *nestings* or nested loops (where a teaching or narrative is contained within another).<sup>104</sup>

<sup>101</sup> See Joy Manné, 1990, 1992.

<sup>102</sup> This recursive pattern is very common, eg the ending of self-identity in **Cha Chakka S** (M 148,22-27/3:284 f), SD 26.6; the def of the 5 aggregates in **Anatta,lakkhaṇa S** (S 22.56.3-11/3:66 f), SD 1.2; the def of priorities in **Ādhipateyya S** (A 3.40/1:147-149, prose section).

<sup>103</sup> See eg the description of the Buddha's disciples in **Mahā Vaccha,gotta S** (M 73,7-12/1:490 f), SD 27.4 (which also uses the recursive sequence).

<sup>104</sup> See eg **Sigāl'ovāda S** (D 31/3:180-193), SD 4.1, where the sutta begins with the 6 directions (D 31,1-2), then breaks off in a nested loop (the 4 defilements of conduct, the 4 motives, the 6 ways of squandering wealth, and the 4 false friends and 4 true friends) (D 31,3-26), and then closes the "six directions" (D 31,27-35). **Sāmā,vatī Vatthu** (the Udena cycle of stories) is an excellent example of multiple nested stories (DhA 2.1/1:160-228). See **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16,5.14)+n, SD 9; **Upāli (Gaha,pati) S** (M 56,23), SD 27.1; **Mahā Sakul'udāyi S** (M 77,18-24), SD 49.5. On computer programme and nesting, see SD 30.8 (4.2.1). On nested story, see SD 22.11 (1.4); SD 49.3 (1.2) story layers.

**4.2.2** The repetitive nature of the early Buddhist texts shows that it has been *orally transmitted*. In other words, such teachings are best *heard*, especially from an experienced and compassionate living teacher. As a complementary practice (that is, as a skilful means), the suttas themselves should be heard. Here, we should choose a translation that we are comfortable with (which we can easily understand).

An effective contemporary version of such a *spiritual exercise* is to get a good reader to read the text to be recorded in digital form. The recording should then be played at an appropriate time, say, as a prelude to meditation, or as an exercise in itself, namely, sutta reflection. The idea of listening to such a Dharma transmission is let various strands of teachings we have heard over time, to interconnect into a coherent whole.

Often we might be very familiar with a doctrine or teaching, say, the 5 aggregates, but this is only a theoretical knowledge mediated through thoughts and words. It is not a direct experience of the reality that the teaching points to. Listening deeply into such readings, unmediated, we let the teachings re-arrange our experiences, jigsaw-puzzle-like, into an ever more complete picture of true reality. If we only *read* what the suttas, we would at best only know, even then never completely, what the Buddha *taught*. Only when we truly *listen* to and hear the Dharma, just as it is, then we are in a better position to understand what the Buddha *teaches*.<sup>105</sup>

### 4.3 ENJOYING THE DHARMA

**4.3.1** We have already noted how the Buddha often skilfully “instructs, inspires, rouses and gladdens” others with the Dharma [3.4.2.1]. The Dharma, in other words, is meant to be *enjoyed*. This fact is further confirmed by such teachings as **the 7 awakening-factors** (*satta bojjhaṅga*) [3.2], namely, mindfulness, dharma-investigation, energy, zest, tranquillity, concentration, and equanimity. The term “zest” (*pīti*) here refers to joyful interest, a kind of happy energy that keeps us going in our spiritual effort.

**4.3.2** Then, there is a set of 6 “inspiring meditations”—that is, recollections (*anussati*) on the Buddha, on the Dharma, on the sangha, on moral virtue, on devatas, and on charity<sup>106</sup>—and the cultivation of loving-kindness (*mettā, bhāvanā*).<sup>107</sup> They instill joy in the meditator,<sup>108</sup> which helps to clear the mind of distractions, and to focus it, as stated in this famous pericope from **the Vatthūpama Sutta** (M 7):

(Having done a recollection on the 3 jewels, ie, one of the first 3 inspiring meditations,)
   
he gains inspired knowledge in the goal (*attha, veda*),<sup>109</sup>
  
he gains inspired knowledge in the truth [reality] (*dhmma, veda*):<sup>110</sup>
  
he gains gladness<sup>111</sup> connected with the truth [reality].
   
When he is gladdened, zest is born.

<sup>105</sup> See The oral tradition of the early Buddhists, SD 58.1.

<sup>106</sup> See Mental cultivation, SD 15.

<sup>107</sup> See SD 38.3.

<sup>108</sup> See *Nimitta*, SD 19.7 (4.6.3(2)).

<sup>109</sup> *Attha, veda* see SD 28.12 (4) above.

<sup>110</sup> *Dhamma, veda* see SD 28.12 (4) above.

<sup>111</sup> Gladness (*pāmuja*) here is the first factors leading to mental concentration. The rest, which follow, are zest (*pīti*), tranquillity (*passaddhi*), happiness (*sukha*) and concentration (*samādhi*). This set is an abridged set of the 7 awakening-facts (*satta bojjhaṅga*): mindfulness (*sati*), dharma-investigation (*dhamma, vicaya*), effort (*virīya*), zest (*pīti*), tranquillity (*passaddhi*), concentration (*samādhi*) and equanimity (*upekkhā*), each suffixed with “awakening-factor” (*sambojjhaṅga*). Functioning as in the 5 dhyana-factors (*jhānaṅga*) [see Dhyana, SD 8.4], *tranquillity* removes the subtle bodily and mental activities connected with gladness and zest, and brings on a stillness conducive to deep concentration and dhyana. See Mahā Sakul’udāyī S (M 77,20/2:12), SD 6.18.

When the mind is zestful, the body is tranquil.

The tranquil body feels happy.

When one is happy, the mind becomes concentrated.<sup>112</sup> (M 7,8/1:38 f), SD 28.12

**4.3.3 In the Gotamaka Cetiya Sutta** (A 3.123), the Buddha states why his teaching is effective, and the reason to rejoice in the Dharma, thus:

The Blessed One said this:

**2** HOW THE BUDDHA TEACHES THE DHARMA.<sup>113</sup>

(1) “Bhikshus, I teach the Dharma based on direct knowledge,<sup>114</sup> not without direct knowledge.

(2) Bhikshus, I teach the Dharma with proper cause and reasoning,<sup>115</sup> not without proper cause and reasoning.

(3) Bhikshus, I teach the Dharma with wonders,<sup>116</sup> not without wonders.

**3** BENEFITS OF THE BUDDHA’S TEACHING. As such, bhikshus, because I teach the Dharma based on direct knowledge, not without direct knowledge; because I teach the Dharma with proper cause and reasoning, not without proper cause and reasoning;

because I teach the Dharma with wonders, not without wonders, my advice should be followed, my teaching should be practised.

**4** And this, bhikshus, is enough for you to be content, enough for you to be gratified, enough for you to be joyful—

Fully self-awakened is the Blessed One.

Well-taught is the Dharma [the true teaching].

Well-conducted is the sangha [the holy community of saints]. (A 3.123/1:276), SD 11.10

**4.3.4** The Buddha’s skilful means works not only because they are an expression of his wisdom, moral virtue, and compassion, but also because it brings joy to the listener. [7]

<sup>112</sup> On this *attha,veda* passage, cf the *nīvaraṇa,pahīna* passage at *Sāmañña,phala* S (D 2,76/1:73), SD 8.10n for other refs. See also (Agata,phala) *Mahānāma* S (A 6.10,5/:286 f @ SD 15.3. On this passage, cf V 1:294; D 1:73; Miln 84.

<sup>113</sup> The 3 teachings also listed in *Mahā Sakul’udāyi* S (M 77,12/2:9 f), SD 49.5.

<sup>114</sup> “Direct knowledge” (*abhiññā*), also called “higher knowledge”, of which there are six (*cha-lābhiññā*) are given in detail in *Sāmañña,phala* S (D 2,87-98/2:77-86), SD 8.10. The Canon has a list of fivefold direct knowledge or supernatural knowledge (*pañcābhiññā*), or what we might today call psychic powers or extrasensory perception (ESP) which are given in the *Sāmañña,phala* S (D 1:77 f) as: (1) various psychic powers (*iddhi,vidhā*). (2) The divine ear (*dibba,sota*), ie clairaudience, the ability to hear speech and sounds from a great distance by paranormal mean. (3) Mind-reading or thought-reading (*para,citta,vijānanā*), ie telepathy, the perception of thought and mental states of another person by paranormal means. (4) Recollection of one’s past lives (*pubbe,nivāsānussati*), ie retrocognition. (5) The divine eye (*dibba,cakkhu*), ie clairvoyance, the perception of objects and events by paranormal means.

(6) Knowledge of the destruction of the cankers (*āsava-k,khaya,nāṇa*), ie of the sense-desires (*kām’āsava*), of existence (*bhav’āsava*), of views (*diṭṭh’āsava*), and ignorance (*avijj’āsava*) (Vbh 334, cf S 2:121) which accompanies the attainment of awakening. See *Miracles*, SD 27.5a (5).

<sup>115</sup> “With proper reasoning” (*sa,nidāna*), ie showing cause and effect, or causality (*paccaya*) (AA 1:374).

<sup>116</sup> “With wonders” (*sa-p,pāṭihāriya*), alt tr “convincingly.” Comys give 2 meanings: (1) defeating the adversaries (such as winning debates with non-Buddhists); (2) bringing out qualities that counter such defilements as lust etc. (AA 1:374; UA 10; ItA 1:21; cf BA 20). In other context, *pāṭihāriya* usually means “extraordinary, wonderful, marvelous, miraculous” (D 1:212, 3:3 f; S 4:290; A 1:170, 5:327; Pm 2:227). On *pāṭihāriya*, see *Miracles*, SD 27.5a (4.1), (4.2.1) & (8).



## MAHĀYĀNA DEVELOPMENTS

### 5 The Mahāyāna view of skilful means

**5.1 A CENTRAL TEACHING IN MAHĀYĀNA.** In or around the first century CE, a more liberal trend of Buddhism arose. At first, it was more prone to a philosophical restatement of the early teachings, as found in the *Prajñāpāramitā* (Perfection of Wisdom) literature (100 BCE-100 CE). In due course, the concept of “emptiness” (*śūnyatā*) played a central role, and the Buddha was viewed as a divine being. This newly conceptualized nature of Buddhahood was formulated in the “three-body” (*tri, kāya*) doctrine.<sup>117</sup>

Such liberal tendencies in tend to justify more religious innovations and the assimilation of local cults and other ideas and methods. Early Buddhist texts, then, become palimpsests used for these revisions. The most active catalyst in this creative process is the later conception of “skilful means” (Skt *upāya*,kauśalya), which is, in fact, a Mahāyāna perfection (*pāramitā*). [6.2.2]

The Mahāyāna Buddhists view “skilful means” with much greater latitude, even licence—that the ends justifies the means—than the early Buddhists. It was expounded early in texts such as the *Upāyaukāśalya Sūtra*, the *Lotus Sūtra* (*Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra*), and the *Teachings of Vimalakīrti Sūtra* (*Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra*). Of course, Mahāyāna ends are often very different from those of early Buddhism.

In chapter 2 of **the Lotus Sūtra**, for example, the Buddha is presented as introducing the doctrine of skilful means. Throughout the text, he is depicted as using numerous parables to show why he needs to make use of various skilful means, including false statements. In the well known parable of the burning house, the Buddha is depicted as a wise kindly father whose words are unheeded by his foolish children.

To entice them into following his advice, he has recourse to a skilful means, promising them non-existent gratifying toys if they come out of the burning house. The Mahāyāna have indeed created a “burning house” for themselves with such parables and such a notion of skilful means—that is, the need of a theodicy.<sup>118</sup>

**5.2 COMPASSION AS LICENCE.** The point of such parables is that this is the only way to bring the foolish and deluded to the path to liberation. Although this entails a degree of duplicity, such as lying, the Mahāyāna Buddha is exonerated from all blame, as it were, because his only motivation is compassion (*karuṇā*) for all beings.

At the root of the Mahāyāna notion of skilful means is the view that the Buddha’s teaching is essentially only a provisional means to bring beings to enlightenment, and that the teachings that he gives may be appropriate at certain time or place, but not another. The Mahāyāna use this reasoning to justify doctrinal innovations, and to portray the Buddha’s early teachings as being limited by the lesser spiritual potential of his early followers.

Early Buddhism, in other words, is for the less intelligent, while the Mahāyāna, on the other hand, is for more intelligent beings. The reality, however, is far from being so self-righteous, as we are very likely today to see a greater emphasis on unquestioning faith in Mahāyāna and the new Buddhisms (the guru or sifu knows best), unlike in early Buddhism.

<sup>117</sup> See eg Guang Xing, *The Concept of the Buddha*, 2005.

<sup>118</sup> In God-centred theology, this is an attempt to prove the existence of God, despite the problem of evil, ie, to explain how an omniscient, omnipotent, all-loving God allows pain and suffering in his creation. Mahāyāna “theodicy” may be understood as how it explains that false statements can be put into the Buddha’s mouth, and yet not go against the grain of the Dharma.

In the Mahāyāna, in other words, skilful means is regarded as a legitimate method used by Buddhas and Bodhisattvas whenever it is deemed to benefit beings. Motivated by their great compassion (*mahā-karuṇā*), Bodhisattvas are depicted in some texts (such as the Upāya-kaśālya Sūtra) as even breaking the precepts and doing actions that would otherwise be morally censured. The assumption underlying the Mahāyāna conception of skilful means is that *all teachings are provisional*, and, as such, the teachings and precepts of Buddhism do not have ultimate validity once “liberation” is attained.<sup>119</sup>

### 5.3 MAHĀYĀNA USE OF SKILFUL MEANS

**5.3.1** One consequence of taking skilful means with such wide latitude is that it can be used to endorse or legitimize a certain practice or teaching, while “simultaneously critiquing its premises or contrasting it unfavorably to another, higher practice.”<sup>120</sup> The Lotus Sutra, for example, uses skilful means as a polemical device against early Buddhist teachings, claiming that the Buddha taught them various skilful means but did not reveal the ultimate truth, for which they were not ready.<sup>121</sup>

**5.3.2** Scholars like **Peter N Gregory** (1999) regards Zhìyǐ’s hermeneutical classification of Buddhist schools (Chinese *panjiao* 判教 “doctrinal classification”)<sup>122</sup> as a “skilful means” (“expedient means”):

The doctrine of expedient means provided the main hermeneutical device by which Chinese Buddhists systematically ordered the Buddha’s teachings in their classificatory schemes. It enabled them to arrange the teachings in such a way that each teaching served as an expedient measure to overcome the particular shortcoming of the teaching that preceded it while, at the same time, pointing to the teaching that was to supersede it. In this fashion a hierarchical progression of teachings could be constructed, starting with the most elementary and leading to the most profound. (1999: unpagged)

**5.3.3** The most important aspect of the Mahāyāna skilful means is the use, guided by wisdom and compassion, of a specific teaching to reach out to a particular audience. **Edward Conze**, in his chapter on Mahāyāna in *A Short History of Buddhism*, says that “‘Skill in means’ is the ability to bring out the spiritual potentialities of different people by statements or actions which are adjusted to their needs and adapted to their capacity for comprehension.” (1980: 50)<sup>123</sup>

**5.3.4** In Mahayana Buddhism, the concept of skilful means is most often used with regards to the actions of a Bodhisattva. The idea is that the Bodhisattva may use a skilful means to help ease the sufferings of beings, bring them to the Dharma, even help them on the path to nirvana. In chapter 25 of the Lotus Sutra, the Buddha is depicted as showing how the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara changes his form to meet the needs of his audience. To teach a monk, for example, the Bodhisattva appears as a monk. We are here, of course, reminded of the historical Buddha’s statement on the 8 assemblies in the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta (16) [3.4.1.2].

<sup>119</sup> See *A Dictionary of Buddhism*, 2003: 318, upāya-kaśālya.

<sup>120</sup> See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Upaya>.

<sup>121</sup> On such stories, see Pye 1978: 37-59 (ch 3).

<sup>122</sup> Zhìyǐ 智顗 (538–597), the 3rd patriarch of the Tiantai school: see How Buddhism became Chinese, SD 40b (2.6.4.4) & <http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/G002SECT7>.

<sup>123</sup> Also in Oliver Leaman (ed), *Eastern Philosophy: Key Readings*, 2000: 215.

**5.3.5** The notion of skilful means is also used to legitimize an otherwise bizarre or unorthodox behaviour, euphemistically referred to as “crazy wisdom” (Tib *yeshe chölwa*), engaged in by charismatic Tantric gurus, best exemplified in the conduct of a siddha (“accomplished one”) or maha,siddha (“great adept,” Tib *grub thob chen po* or *tul shug*). They are non-monastic yogis, regarded as enlightened, and famed for their magical powers and eccentricity, found in both Hinduism and Tantrism.<sup>124</sup>

It is vitally important to understand that these siddhas are not “beyond good and evil” [8.4.2] to the extent of being licentious. On the contrary, they are regarded as being highly disciplined and realized meditators whose skilful means sometimes appear to be unconventional. The siddha tradition is itself, at least in part, a Tantric skilful means in response to the popular Hindu Tantra and indigenous Bon shamanism.<sup>125</sup> Indeed, the rich tradition of practices and rituals in the Vajrayāna are often regarded as skilful means, whereby practitioners sublimate their misconceptions and mundane traits to help themselves be liberated from them: it is like fighting poison with poison.

## **6 Some problems with skilful means**

### **6.1 SKILFUL MEANS AND URBAN BUDDHISM**

**6.1.1** As the Indian towns grew bigger and prospered, their inhabitants had more surplus or disposable wealth and time. Monastics who were drawn to such lucrative patrons and clients, too, became *more urbanized and money-based*.<sup>126</sup> We know that about a century after the Buddha’s parinirvana (around 386 or 376 BCE), a major controversy arose regarding, amongst other things, the use of money (“gold and silver”), that led to the convening of the Second Buddhist Council.<sup>127</sup>

The oldest records we have of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Council or **the Council of Vesālī** (Skt Vaiśālī) is found in the Cullavagga 12 of the Pali Vinaya.<sup>128</sup> Most other sources also mention this event, especially since it later resulted in a schism between the **Sthaviravāda** (Pali, *Theravāda*, “Teaching of the Elders”) and the **Mahā-saṅghika** (“the Great Sangha party”).

**6.1.2** From the field studies and works of such archaeologists and scholars like John Marshall<sup>129</sup> and researches of Gregory Schopen,<sup>130</sup> we are told that monks often owned considerable amounts of property, had money at their disposal, gave financial loans with interests, and were even minting their own

<sup>124</sup> The Tibetans recognize 84 such siddhas, incl Padmasambhava, Naropa, Marpa and Milarepa.

<sup>125</sup> According to Keith Dowman (*Masters of Mahamudra*, 1986 intro) all these siddhas lived between 750-1150 CE: <http://www.keithdowman.net/essays/siddhas.htm>.

<sup>126</sup> By “urbanized,” I mean they tend to be located in or near populated area, or geared up to attract large crowds. “Money-based” means that most, if not all, activities or goods of the temple have a marketable price, and you need to pay for the directly or indirectly, and that there is usually some form of dodgy financial management, like well-disguised tax evasion.

<sup>127</sup> See Money and monastics, SD 4.19-23.

<sup>128</sup> Accounts of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Council are found in Vinaya (Cv 12 = V 2:294-308), Dīpavaṃsa (Dīpv 4.52-58, 5.16-19), Mahāvamsa (Mahv 4) and Samanta,pāsādikā (VA 30-37). The Vinaya Comy notes that in the early stages of the controversy, king Kāl’āsoka was a supporter of the Vajjī monks (VA 1:33).

<sup>129</sup> John Marshall, *Taxila: An illustrated account of archaeological excavations carried out at Taxila under the orders of the government of India between the years 1913-1934*, vol 1, Cambridge, 1951:204. See also RBDR Sahni, *Archaeological Remains and Excavations at Bairat*, Jaipur, 1937:21 f & D B Diskalkar, “Excavations at Kasrawad,” *Indian Historical Quarterly* 25, 1949:21 ff.

<sup>130</sup> *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks: Collected essays on the archaeology, epigraphy and texts of monasticism in India*, Studies in Buddhist Tradition series. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997:3-5.

money.<sup>131</sup> With such evidence, we can surmise that during the period after the Buddha's passing and the Turkish Muslim invasion of India and disappearance of Buddhism from the subcontinent, there was a growing laicization of the Buddhist monastics in India. This is clearly one of the reasons, and a very important one, too, for the decline of Buddhism in India.<sup>132</sup>

**6.1.3** Another new development is that of **scholasticism**—namely, the Abhidharma traditions—especially of the Theravāda and the Sarvāstivāda (and such traditions differ from one another on many important points). The Mahā,saṅghika, which propagated an apotheosized or divine Buddha, rejected the Abhidharma. The scholastic tradition later flowered as the Perfection of Wisdom (*prajñā, pāramitā*) literature. The scholastic tradition reached its apex in the great Buddhist universities, such as Nālandā.

**6.1.4** While the contemplative monastic tradition quietly continued in the forest, Buddhism in the urbanized areas was dominated by a more liberal money-based scholastic tradition living in large well-structured monasteries. It is in such a milieu that the more progressive Buddhists, those of the urban areas, in due course began to call themselves as the Mahā,yāna (“the great vehicle”)—after all, they are the majority—and label the more conservative contemplative tradition and those who rejected their liberalism, as Hīna,yāna (“the inferior vehicle”). An important catalyst in this radical rise of Mahāyāna is a more liberal conception of skilful means.

## **6.2 SKILFUL MEANS AS DEBUNKING HĪNAYĀNA.**

### **6.2.1 Rationalization**

**6.2.1.1** Before we can call a spade a spade, we must be sure that it *is* a spade. However, when it is totally dark, it is often difficult to even see one; then we cannot even call one!<sup>133</sup> The Lotus Sūtra [5.3] and the Vimala, Kīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra [5.1]—two well-known Mahāyāna works—for example, openly parodies and denigrates the great saints of early Buddhism, especially the extraordinarily humble Sāriputra, second only to the Buddha himself in wisdom.

Such Mahāyāna works, for example, wrongly depict the early arhats as being inflexible moralistic monks who were nervous sticklers to monastic rules (Sāriputta is depicted as being restless about the

<sup>131</sup> Marshall, commenting on one of the numerous hoards of coins found at the monastic site surrounding the Dharmarājikā stupa at Taxila, said: “Probably the hollow block of kañjūr [scripture] was merely a secret hiding place where one of the monks hid his store of coins ... the possession of money by a monk *was contrary, of course, to the rule of the Church*, but the many small hoards that have been found in monasteries of the early mediaeval period leave little room for doubt that by that time the rules had become more or less a dead letter” (1937:21 f). Schopen adds that “Such hoards, in fact, found in Buddhist monasteries that are very much earlier than ‘the early mediaeval period’” (1997:17 n19). On the occurrences of money-minting in monasteries at Kasrawad, see Diskalkar, *IHQ* 25, 1949: 15; at Nālandā, B Kumar, *Archaeology of Pataliputra and Nalanda*, Delhi, 1987:212; SSP Sarasvati, *Coinage in Ancient India: A numismatic, archaeochemical and metallurgical study of ancient Indian coins*, vol 1, Delhi, 1986: 202 f; and Schopen 1997:5.

<sup>132</sup> See Money and monastics, SD 4.19-23 (9.4).

<sup>133</sup> The root source of this saying is Plutarch's *Apophthegmata Laconica* (178B) which has την σκαφην σκαφην λεγοντας (*ten skafen skafen legontas*). σκαφη (*skafe*) means “basin, trough,” but it was mistranslated as *ligo* “shovel” by Erasmus in his *Apophthegmatum opus*. Lucian *De historia conscribenda* (41) has τα συκα συκα, την σκαφην δε σκαφην ονομασων (*ta syka syka, ten skafen de skafen onomason*) “calling a fig a fig, and a trough a trough.” The phrase was introduced to English in 1542. <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/call-a-spade-a-spade.html> & [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/To\\_call\\_a\\_spade\\_a\\_spade](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/To_call_a_spade_a_spade).

meal-time as noon approaches);<sup>134</sup> as being guilt-ridden (he feels uncomfortable when a heavenly mandarava flowers stick on to his robe, but not onto the Bodhisattvas).<sup>135</sup>

The arhathood of Sāriputta<sup>136</sup> and of other great saints, such as Subhūti, Mahā Katyāyana, Mahā Kaśyapa, Mahā Maudgalyāyana, Pūrṇa Maitrayani, putra, Ānanda,<sup>137</sup> Rāhula<sup>138</sup> and 500 monks,<sup>139</sup> are falsely depicted as not bringing him them full liberation or awakening, so that the Buddha is made to declare their “conversion” to Buddhahood.

We only need to cite this well-known stock passage to show that **the finality of arhathood**, that being an arhat is as good as buddhahood itself in terms of self-awakening:

Then, the venerable *<so-and-so>*, dwelling alone, aloof, diligent, exertive, and resolute, having right here and now realized it for himself through direct knowledge, attained and dwelled in that supreme goal of the holy life, for the sake of which sons of family rightly go forth from the household life into homelessness.

He directly knew: “Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, done what is to be done, there is no more of this state of being.”<sup>140</sup>

And the venerable *<so-and-so>* became one of the arhats. (D 9,56.2/1:203; M 73,26/1:496)

Here, it is clear that the arhats of the Lotus Sutra and similar Mahāyāna sutras are not the historical saints of the Buddha’s teachings. For, if this is the case, the magnitude of unwholesome karma would be unimaginable; for, they would be those

who reviled the noble ones, held wrong views and undertook actions under the influence of wrong views—after death, when the body has broken up, have re-appeared in a plane of misery, an evil destination, a lower realm, in hell.

(D 2,97/1:82 = M 4,29/1:22 f = 36,38/1:248 = 100,37/2:212 = S 28.14,36.4/5:280)<sup>141</sup>

Clearly, such works belong to the literary genre of satire or parody, like Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1735) and Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* (1865). The writers of such Mahāyāna satires and parodies presented as a sutra are like today’s self-tutored and self-propelled professionals with surplus wealth and time, presenting Buddhism according to their whims and wiles, instead of working for self-awakening.

It might be perfectly gratifying to start and run a “Gulliver’s Travels” club or a Jedi cult, where its members idolize the author and characters. But if the book or character becomes an object of worship, and the fantasies are taken as gospel truth, as a religion, we have some very serious issues. At its most innocuous, we would have a glorified book club. At its most insidious, we would have an exclusivist or intolerant religion.

Informed Buddhists might even charge that such works (as the Lotus Sutra and the Vimalakīrti Sūtra), if taken as serious religious works, without understanding their true nature, intentions and implications,

<sup>134</sup> Vimalakīrti Sūtra ch 10; Alan Cole 2005: 288 f. Restlessness has overcome by the arhat: see Udakūpama S (A 7.15), SD 28.6 (1.2.7).

<sup>135</sup> T14.547c.23; Watson, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* 86. See Alan Cole 2005: 283-288.

<sup>136</sup> Lotus Sutra ch 3; Alan Cole 2005: 100.

<sup>137</sup> Lotus Sutra ch 4; Alan Cole 2005: 100.

<sup>138</sup> Lotus Sutra ch 6; Alan Cole 2005: 101.

<sup>139</sup> Lotus Sutra ch 8; Alan Cole 2005: 101.

<sup>140</sup> On this para and the next (the attainment of arhathood), see Poṭṭhapāda S (D 9,56.2/1:203) n, SD 7.14.

<sup>141</sup> See, too, Pavāraṇā S (S 8.7), SD 49.11, & Sambuddha S (S 22,58), SD 49.10, on arhathood being the same as the Buddha’s awakening.

are more likely to hasten the Dharma-ending age for their proponents and followers. And if such works qualify as skilful means, they could only serve a licence to take Buddhist teachings in any way we like. This would easily degrade into revisionism, a departure from the Buddha's teachings, at its most licentious.

### 6.2.2 Moral revisionism

**6.2.2.1** It is important at this juncture to clarify that what has been said so far is not a summary judgement that Mahāyāna is licentious. Indeed, as far as moral virtue goes, Mahāyāna practitioners could be just as serious and accomplished as any other bona fide Buddhist practitioner. In the Mahāyāna, however, there is generally a greater emphasis on *compassion* rather than wisdom. A good case in point would be the Mahāyāna view of the six perfections (*pāramitā*) [5.2].<sup>142</sup>

**6.2.2.2** According to the Mahāyāna, the 6 perfections (*pāramitā*) are:

- |                     |               |
|---------------------|---------------|
| (1) generosity,     | <i>dāna</i>   |
| (2) moral virtue,   | <i>śīla</i>   |
| (3) patience,       | <i>kṣānti</i> |
| (4) energy,         | <i>vīrya</i>  |
| (5) meditation and  | <i>dhyāna</i> |
| (6) insight wisdom. | <i>Prajñā</i> |

These were eventually increased to ten to complement the ten stages (*bhūmi*) of a Bodhisattva's career, that is, with the following:<sup>143</sup>

- |                      |                       |
|----------------------|-----------------------|
| (7) skilful means,   | <i>upāya kauśalya</i> |
| (8) vow,             | <i>prañidhāna</i>     |
| (9) strength and     | <i>bala</i>           |
| (10) true knowledge. | <i>jñāna</i>          |

**6.2.2.3** The Mahāyāna texts generally give greater attention to the first six perfections,<sup>144</sup> than the final four. As **Damien Keown** has noted (1992:130 f), these six perfections closely resemble the 5 faculties (*pañc'indriya*) of the Pali canon, namely,

<sup>142</sup> The Mahāyāna 6 perfections (*pāramitā*) are older than the Theravāda 10 perfections (*pāramī*), as the commentator Dhammapāla (late 5<sup>th</sup> cent) says that the 6 perfections are the equivalent (by "specific nature") of the 10 (CA 277): see Bodhi (tr), *The All-embracing Net of View*, 1978: 314. Dasa, bhūmika Sūtra adds 4 more *pāramitās*, viz: (7) skilful means (*upāya*); (8) vow or resolution (*prañidhāna*); (9) spiritual power (*bala*); (10) true knowledge (*jñāna*). See Dayal 1932: ch 5. The 10 perfections (*dasa pāramī*), which are commentarial, are: generosity (*dāna*), moral virtue (*śīla*), renunciation (*nekkhamma*), insight wisdom (*paññā*), effort (*virīya*), patience (*khanti*), truth (*sacca*), determination (*adhiṭṭhāna*), lovingkindness (*mettā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*). For "A treatise on the paramis" (tr of CA 276-232), see Bodhi, *The All-embracing Net of Views*, Kandy, 1978: 254-330). For a tr of Dhammapāla's comy, see <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/wheel409.html>. See also Vism 9.124/325; Law 1934; Keown 1992: 130-135. For overview, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/P%C4%81ramit%C4%81>.

<sup>143</sup> Before Kumāra, jīva, in India, the Bodhisattva doctrine was rooted in the 6 perfections (*pāramitā*). In due course, the 6 perfections grew into ten. The knowledge of emptiness at the sixth stage was surpassed by the tenth stage, that of the perfection of knowledge (*jñāna, pāramitā*). The 8<sup>th</sup> stage<sup>143</sup> was the point of departure between the Hīnayāna arhat and the Mahāyāna Bodhisattva. See How Buddhism became Chinese, SD 40b (4.1.2.9).

<sup>144</sup> See Śūraṅgama Samādhi Sūtra (tr E Lamotte, *La Concentration de la Marche Héroïque*, Brussels), 1965: 26-38; Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra (French tr E Lamotte) (Eng tr Sara Boin, *The Teaching of Vimalakīrti*, London) 1976: 1.3;



- |                   |                         |
|-------------------|-------------------------|
| (1) faith         | ( <i>saddhā</i> ),      |
| (2) energy        | ( <i>virīya</i> ),      |
| (3) mindfulness   | ( <i>satī</i> ),        |
| (4) concentration | ( <i>samādhi</i> ), and |
| (5) wisdom        | ( <i>paññā</i> ).       |

It will be noted that moral virtue (*sīla*) does not occur as one of the faculties, but it is found as one of the 10 perfections, which are said to be the “qualities that make a Buddha” (*buddha, kāraka, dhammā*).<sup>145</sup>

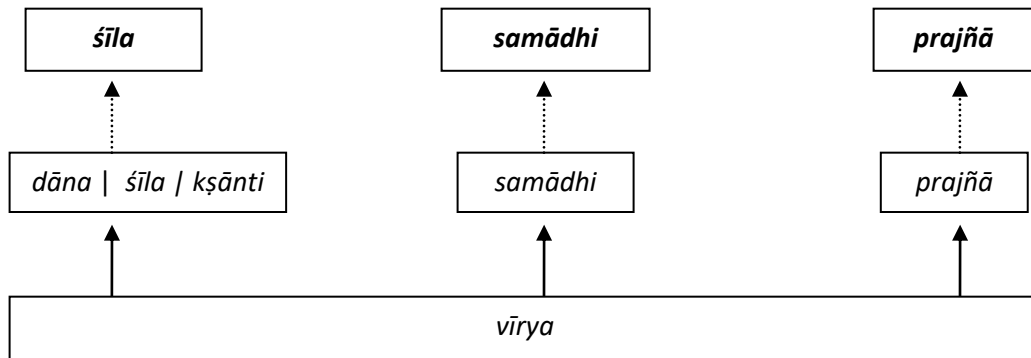


Fig 6.2.2 (after Keown)

**6.2.2.4** According to Keown, the Mahāyāna scheme of the six perfections may be related to the 3 trainings of moral virtue, concentration and wisdom (*sīla samādhi pañña*) of the noble eightfold path. In fact, this is explained in the commentary to the *Ornament of Mahāyāna Sūtras*, where it is stated that the first three perfections (*dāna, sīla, kṣānti*) correspond higher moral virtue (*adhiśīla*), the fifth (*dhyāna*) to higher mind (*adhicitta*), and the sixth (*prajñā*) to higher wisdom (*adhiprajñā*), while the fourth (*virīya*) is common to all three trainings.<sup>146</sup> (1995: 130 f). (Fig 6.2.2)

Fig 6.2.2 represents how the Mahāyāna conception of the six perfections broaden moral virtue (*sīla*) to be on a par with giving (*dāna*) and patience (*kṣānti*). But in early Buddhism, moral virtue is a basic goal (the restraint of body and speech) to be cultivated as basis for mental cultivation (*samādhi*). And wisdom (*paññā*) works on both these levels as right view.<sup>147</sup>

**6.2.2.5** While early Buddhism (Hīna, yāna) defines its basic values as *vijjā, caraṇa*, that is, wisdom (*paññā*) and moral virtue (*sīla*), the Mahāyāna takes them to be wisdom (*prajñā*) and compassion (*karuṇā*), or wisdom (*paññā*) and skilful means (*upāya*). This change is significant as it shows a radical shift to a new emphasis and practice. Moral virtue does not so much form the basis for mental cultivation or of self-restraint, as it is an expression of compassion by way of an other-regarding quality. The Vimala, kīrti Nirdeśa, for example, declares that:

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Mahāyāna Sūtrālaṅkāra (ed & tr S Lévi, v1 text, v2 tr, Paris) 1907: ch 16 v14; Vijñapti, matratā Siddhi (tr Louis de la Vallée Poussin, 3 vols, Paris) 1928: 620-638.

<sup>145</sup> ApA 28, 49; BA 104, 271; CpA 289, 333; J 1:20, 25, 44;

<sup>146</sup> See Mahāyāna Sūtrālaṅkāra (ed & tr S Lévi, v1 text, v2 tr, Paris) 1907: 100.11 ff. The same division is followed by sGam-po-pa, *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation* (tr HV Guenther, London) 1970: 148.

<sup>147</sup> On the primacy of right view (*sammā, diṭṭhi*), see Sammā Diṭṭhi S (M 9/1:46-55) = S 11.14. On the vital link between moral virtue and wisdom, see Soṇa, daṇḍa S (D 4, 21-22/1:124), SD 30.5. On the 3 trainings (*sikkhā*), see (Ti) Sikkhā S (A 3.88/1:235), SD 24.10c.

For pure Bodhisattvas, their mother is the perfection of wisdom (*prajñā, pāramitā*), their father is skilful means (*upāya, kauśalya*): the Leaders of the world are born of such parents. (Vks 7.6.1)<sup>148</sup>

**6.2.2.6** This paradigm shift is one of the root factors that differentiates Mahāyāna from early Buddhism. Mahāyāna places a greater ideological value on compassion, while early Buddhism places equal value on both wisdom and compassion, regarding them as inseparable in theory and practice. An important reason for this is that the Mahāyāna ideologues and innovators placed little or no emphasis on meditation as found in early Buddhism. Greater emphases were placed on ritual responses to words and sounds (in the form of koans, etc) and to rituals in various forms (such as recitations for the dead).

The reality of the situation is that such skilful means were mainly well orchestrated and respectable means of attracting funds and assets (buildings, etc), and as a rule without any spiritually significant Buddhist teachings or practices.<sup>149</sup>

### 6.2.3 Wisdom and skilful means

**6.2.3.1** The Mahāyāna made another significant shift away from early Buddhism. In an important sense, Mahāyāna puts less emphasis on the eightfold path, and more emphasis on **the six perfections** [6.2.2]. **Dan Lusthaus**, in his *Buddhist Phenomenology*, for example, states that “Mahāyāna Buddhism in effect reduced the Eightfold Path, which was a cornerstone of early Buddhist thought, to Six Pāramitās” (2002: 246). In his footnote, Lusthaus qualifies his remark by adding that,

“Reduced” is perhaps too strong a word, since it is the centrality of the Eightfold Path which becomes displaced, not the list itself. The Eightfold Path re-emerges as part of the list of Thirty-Seven Factors of Awakening,<sup>150</sup> which is adopted by Mahāyāna through the Prajñāpāramitā literature which in turn compiled it from the Abhidharmic literature. (Lusthaus 2002: 267 n4)

**6.2.3.2** The rise of the *pāramitā* system in Mahāyāna, “finally raised *prajñā* above *śīla* and *samādhi*, and this privileging was marked by the production of the *prajñā-pāramitā* literature which both ushered in and consolidated the Mahāyānic Buddhist schools” (2002: 246). The prominence of *prajñā* in its own right is a clear departure from early Buddhism, where as already mentioned, it overlaps with moral virtue [2.2.2], which is inseparable from compassion, as it is what underlies moral virtue.

**6.2.3.3** Wisdom as *prajñā*<sup>151</sup> came into such prominence in the Mahāyāna that they saw the Buddha as being omniscient (*sarvajñā*).<sup>152</sup> In the early Buddhist texts, such as **the Devadaha Sutta** (M 101), the Buddha categorically rejects all claims to being omniscient, in the sense of knowing all things at all times, but allows that he can, if he wishes, know anything worth knowing at any time.<sup>153</sup>

<sup>148</sup> See Keown 1992: 130-135.

<sup>149</sup> My remark here refers mainly to “ideological Mahāyāna,” ie, those who covertly or overtly, see the mundane advantages of a distinct school, sect or teaching. There is much good still to be found in Mahāyāna. We do see today, for example, that the theory, practice and goal of Chan or Zen meditation differ little from those of early Buddhism. Where ideology and sectarianism are silenced by the calm insight of meditation, their practitioners speak a common language.

<sup>150</sup> On the 37 limbs of awakening (*bodhi, pakkhiyā dhammā*) (which Lusthaus here calls “factors of awakening,” see *Bodhi, pakkhiyā Dhamma*, SD 10.1.

<sup>151</sup> On *prajñā*, see Lusthaus 2002: 115-118.

<sup>152</sup> See Jan Ergardt 1977: 88 f.

<sup>153</sup> See esp M 101.10/2:217 f @ SD 18.4; also Sandaka S (S 76.21/1:519), SD 35.7.

However, beginning with the early Pali commentarial literature, such as the *Milinda, pañha* (The Questions of Milinda), which was compiled around the time of the earliest *Prajñā, pāramitā*, the Buddha began to be conceived as being omniscient (*sabbaññū*) in the Mahāyāna sense. And in the Mahāyāna text, the Buddha figure had evolved into an omniscient transcendental being.

**6.2.3.4** As Lusthaus observes, “Since Buddha had become the example par excellence for Buddhists to imitate and emulate, this shift also reflected a change in Buddhist practice. The *mārga* [path] was now seen as a pursuit of cognitive mastery.” (2002: 246). And he instructively captures the spirit of early Mahāyāna, where:

... concepts and terms involving the root *jñā* (knowing, knowledge) became increasingly concerned with correct cognition and theories of knowledge. All these developments are symptomatic of the privileging of *prajñā* ...

Privileging *prajñā* in this manner signaled a change in the way the notion of “Awakening” (*bodhi*) had come to be conceived. Increasingly it began to revolve around epistemic issues. *Prajñā* and *jñāna* no longer simply denoted means or conditions for attaining Awakening,<sup>154</sup> but began serve as powerful, frequently cited synonyms for Awakening itself.

Doctrinally the focus of Buddhist praxis narrowed (even as the practices themselves proliferated), and Awakening became primarily and explicitly seen as some sort of *cognitive* acuity, a Seeing of reality just as it is (*tathatā*).<sup>155</sup>

The language of the early Nikāyas, which was frequently more psychological than technically epistemological, was displaced by a rigorous philosophical and epistemological language. The descriptions of Awakening as “overcoming the *āsavas*” or drying up the flood of deep-seated affective disorders, gave way to discourses aimed at reorienting or deconstructing the fundamental cognitive structures through which we attempt to perceive, evaluate and relate to ourselves and the world.<sup>156</sup>

Consequently *śīla* and *samādhi* came to be seen more and more as prerequisites for *prajñā* rather than as factors in parity with it. (Lusthaus 2002: 247)

**6.2.3.5** By Asoka’s time (3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE), this gravitation towards scholastic “wisdom” had also occurred in Theravāda Buddhism, as evident in such works as the *Kathā, vatthu*. Just like the Mahāyāna, the Theravāda Abhidhamma, too, privileged the position of wisdom (*paññā*) even to the extent of alienating insight wisdom (*vipassanā*) into a separate category above mental calm (*samatha*).<sup>157</sup>

**6.2.4 What’s in a name?** The biggest karmic embarrassment of the Mahāyāna is arguably its own name. Insofar as it tried to call the kettle black, it became itself a sooty cauldron of mixed teachings and feelings. The Mahāyāna genius was admirable for its experimental ideas and practices, seemingly goaded by the notion that new was better. It’s hard to blame anyone for such innovations because the Buddhisms that grew after the Buddha and outside of India never had the ideal conditions of early Indian Buddhism. They had to struggle, even compromise, with challenging religious, cultural, political and social conditions.<sup>158</sup>

And when it did reach the peak of success in such societies, it was always burdened and blurred by its own success. Potentates, clerics and opportunists exploited Buddhist teachings and practices, reconstruc-

<sup>154</sup> Cf Sasaki, who understands *prajñā* primarily as “knowledge to be practised,” and *jñāna* as “knowledge achieved” (*Linguistic Approach to Buddhist Thought*, Delhi, 1986: 90-105).

<sup>155</sup> On *tathatā*, “Suchness” as some sort of abiding entity, see an early rebuttal: Kvu 19.5/583-585. (Note added)

<sup>156</sup> Cf Dayal 1932: 109.

<sup>157</sup> See Lusthaus 2002: 248-254; also *Samatha* and *Vipassanā*, SD 41.1,

<sup>158</sup> See eg How Buddhism became Chinese, SD 40b.

ting and repackaging Buddhism—all this, often in the name of skilful means, but not for the good and happiness of the many.

Mahāyāna apologists of our time are generally embarrassed with the dichotomy of Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna. Firstly, it is obvious who started the slur. Secondly, whoever started the slur were unable to read or understand the early Buddhist teachings, or worse, they rejected them. Thirdly, without the Hīnayāna, there would be no Mahāyāna. It is almost like if there were no Roman Catholicism, there would have been no Protestantism and no mega-churches. It is a traveler who, having drunk water from a well, then, with his feet, covers it up with dirt, and walks away. It would be very sad if the history of a religion were one of rejecting and rewriting its past. The point is that we each write our own histories, and we will bear the karma of our words, too.

As for the Hinayanists themselves, I do not think they are very much affected in a negative sense, not if they are imbued with the calm and clarity that are their spiritual heritage. The label Hīnayāna will remain with us forever, marking an important phase of post-Buddha history. Thoughtful scholars have tried to use other skilful terms like “pre-Mahāyāna Buddhism,” “Nikāya Buddhism” or “early Buddhism.” But *Hīnayāna* is a pregnant term, reminding us of the Mahāyāna rejection of early Buddhism. Only when there is no Mahāyāna, would its doppelganger, Hīnayāna, be meaningless and needless. Or, when the Mahāyāna goes beyond compassion and cultivate unconditional love, and includes even the Hīnayāna in their lives.

### 6.3 MAHĀYĀNA GROWTH AND UNDERGROWTH.

**6.3.1 Mahāyāna developments.** There is to date no consensus on exactly how the Mahāyāna arose, which is understandable, because it was not a single school arising from a particular place, but it was more of a general attitude or tendency to be different from the contemplative and disciplinarian early saints and practitioners. Perhaps a better imagery of the Mahāyāna would be that of small streams flowing down the early Buddhist mountain, and as these streams meandered through the lower reaches, they swelled up philosophically and ideologically. Then, some streams merged with others, or were directed through man-made canals to empty into vast rivers, and then flowed imperiously to flood the deltas before emptying in the ocean of samsara.

In less dramatic terms, **Keown’s** observation of such Mahāyāna developments is instructive:

as ... in the Small Vehicle, final perfection is also conceived of a bilateral by the Mahāyāna. Once again a distinction is made between the moral perfections and the perfection of insight or knowledge. We may note the change in terminology introduced by the Mahāyāna: whereas the Small Vehicle defines its basic values as insight (*paññā*) and morality (*sīla*) the Mahāyāna refers to these as insight (*prajñā*) and means (*upāya*), or insight (*prajñā*) and compassion (*karuṇā*). The terminological change reflects a new emphasis on the function of moral virtue as a dynamic other-regarding quality, rather than primarily concerned with personal development and self-control. (Keown 1992: 131)

**6.3.2 Chán skilful means.** One interesting, albeit mundane, feature of the east Asian Mahāyāna (and of all Mahāyāna to some extent) is that it is almost always associated with wealth and power.<sup>159</sup> One of the historical highlights of Buddhism in the late Táng 唐 dynasty, for example, was the political exploits of the worldly and ambitious Hézé Shénhuì 荷澤神會 (688-762), who fabricated his own Chán lineage,<sup>160</sup>

<sup>159</sup> See eg How Buddhism became Chinese, SD 40b.2 esp ch 5.

<sup>160</sup> See John MacRae, *The Northern School and the Formation of the Early Ch’an Buddhism*. Honolulu, 1986 esp 235-253; also Peter N Gregory, *Sudden and Gradual*, Honolulu, 1987.

the legend of Bodhidharma's role in Chán, and the Sixth Patriarch Sutra, amongst others. In fact, so successful were Shénhuì's fabrications and ideologies, such as, discrediting the northern school of Chán, that even today, many Chán or Zen exponents have difficulty in accepting the historical truths that Shénhuì covered up.<sup>161</sup>

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, western explorers and sinologists, such as Paul Pelliot and Aurel Stein, discovered a huge cache of ancient texts in Cave 16 of the Mògāo Caves in Dūnhuáng.<sup>162</sup> These manuscripts were hand-written in many languages, including Chinese, Tibetan and Uighur, and had been hidden away safely during a period of civil unrest, and then left undisturbed for centuries after. The discovery of **the Dūnhuáng manuscripts** has been compared with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, as these documents have radically changed our understanding of medieval China and east Asian Buddhism.<sup>163</sup>

Amongst the Dūnhuáng manuscripts walled up in the cave in the 9<sup>th</sup> century are found the earliest examples of Chinese movable-type printing, as well as the earliest versions of many Buddhist texts, making them an invaluable source for the history of Buddhism in China, India and Tibet. From these valuable ancient texts, modern scholars were able to piece together a truer history of mediaeval Chinese Buddhism, such as the true origins of the Platform Sutra<sup>164</sup> and that northern Chán was just as orthodox as southern Chán, but through the "skilful means" of zealots like Shénhuì (and social unrest), northern Buddhism disappeared from the Chinese Buddhist map, as it were.<sup>165</sup>

## 6.4 SKILFUL MEANS AS LICENCE.

### 6.4.1 Desperate measures for desperate times

**6.4.1.1** The Mahāyāna monastics and monasteries, on the other hand, often controlled enormous wealth, large tracts of land, and a great number of slaves and dependents. Such worldly inclinations of the Mahāyāna monastics significantly affected the economy of ancient empires and societies, so that their rulers were not always well-disposed to them. During times of social unrest or power shifts, Mahāyāna Buddhists were often persecuted so that they had to desperately resort to skilful means to survive such difficulties.

After the period of Early Chán, when the Chinese Sangha lost the patronage of the state and the gentry as a result of troubled times and social change,<sup>166</sup> influential Chinese monks like Zōngmì 宗密 (780-841)<sup>167</sup> and Yánshòu 延壽 (904-975)<sup>168</sup> looked for other means of legitimizing their form of Buddh-

<sup>161</sup> See eg Wendi Adamek, *The Mystique of Transmission*, New York, 2007; Albert Welter, *Monks, Rulers, and Literati*, New York, 2006.

<sup>162</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mogao\\_Caves](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mogao_Caves). Sadly, today, the desert is rapidly swallowing the Mogao area, and the caves are in serious danger of being lost: see <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/the-gathering-sandstorm-encroaching-desert-missing-water-399653.html>.

<sup>163</sup> See Wendi L Adamek "Robes purple and gold," *History of Religion* 40,1 Aug 2000:58-81 (see p60). Accessible at [http://www.thezensite.com/ZenEssays/HistoricalZen/robes\\_purple\\_and\\_gold.pdf](http://www.thezensite.com/ZenEssays/HistoricalZen/robes_purple_and_gold.pdf).

<sup>164</sup> For a detailed study of the Platform Sutra as a text, see Yampolsky 1967: 88-110 (Intro).

<sup>165</sup> See eg *The Mystique of Transmission: On an Early Chan History and its Contexts*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007

<sup>166</sup> See How Buddhism became Chinese, SD 40b (4.3.2.2) & (7.4.1).

<sup>167</sup> Fully, Guīfēng Zōngmì 圭峰宗密, Táng dynasty scholar-monk and 5th patriarch of the Huáyán school 華嚴宗 & a patriarch of the Hézhé 荷澤 Chán lineage. He wrote a number of important essays on the situation of Táng Buddhism of his time, and is one of the most important figures in East Asian Buddhist history in terms of providing modern scholars with a clear analysis of the development of Chán and Huáyán, and the general intellectual and religious climate of his times. Unlike some of his more radical and cryptic Chán contemporaries, he was a sobre

ism. Instead of looking *outside* the Buddhist fold for legitimization, they sought for it *within* Chinese Buddhism, that is, through emphasizing the practice of moral virtue as it is envisioned in China.

**6.4.1.2** The *Fànwǎng jīng* 梵網經 (\*Brahmajāla Sūtra)<sup>169</sup> and the *Púsà yīngluò běnyè jīng* 菩薩瓔珞本業經,<sup>170</sup> for example, give explicit allowances for self-initiation into the precepts, along with instruction on how to do so. The Bodhisattva precepts were believed to be empowered by the Mahāyāna Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and deities themselves, so that their practitioners were purportedly purged of bad karma more effectively and more quickly than in the Hīnayāna (that is, early Indian) system.

Zōngmì and Yánshòu echoed the prevalent popular notion that genuine precepts should be a spontaneous expression of awakened nature rather than be “apparent precepts” (*xiāngjiè* 相戒) of inflexible maxims, that is, “dead letters.” To these great Mahāyāna minds, moral conduct and foundation were indispensable for the well-being of the Mahāyāna Buddhist community. However, they saw moral virtue as “internal precepts” that superseded the “external rules” of a foreign Buddhism, and was against “being attached to the provisional, Hīnayānist regulations.” (*Sānbùlǚ chāo* 三部律抄, T85.2793.675c).<sup>171</sup>

**6.4.1.3** During the Míng dynasty (1368-1643), the emperor banned all Vinaya ceremonies, effectively putting an end to the traditional monastic ordination. The resourceful Chinese clergy and faithful resorted to the Bodhisattva Precepts and other innovations. The persecuted Chinese Buddhists again resorted to the *Fànwǎng Jīng* and the *Púsà yīngluò běnyè*.<sup>172</sup> Similar restrictions, as we shall see, also occurred in Japan. [8.3.3]

In this new “simplified” preceptive system, what was deemed as the laborious steps of training of early Buddhism was *replaced by rituals and vows*, very much like the Confucian system. The early ecclesiastical act of ordination was not easily available, and even if it was, the standards for candidacy were too rigorous. Understandably, the Chinese found Tantric rituals simply attractive with their promise of immediate power and efficacy. Such “empowerments” emotionally satisfied those thirsty for legitimization and status that were absent from a commercially acquired monastic identity (by way of purchase of an ordination certificate).<sup>173</sup>

**6.4.1.4** Interestingly, in Theravāda monastic history which goes back to well before the Mahāyāna has no record of such innovations. The Theravāda ordination lineages have continued almost problem-free throughout its history. The main reason for this is probably because the Theravāda monks were (and are) only minimally involved with political intrigues than the Mahāyāna monastics were.

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and meticulous scholar who wrote extensive critical analyses of the various Chán and scholastic sects of the period, as well as numerous scriptural exegeses. See <http://www.buddhism-dict.net/>.

<sup>168</sup> See Albert Welter, “The problem with orthodoxy in Zen Buddhism,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 31,1 2002: [http://www.wlu.ca/press/Journals/sr/issues/31\\_1/welter.pdf](http://www.wlu.ca/press/Journals/sr/issues/31_1/welter.pdf).

<sup>169</sup> T24.1484.997a-1010a, “\*Brahmajāla Sūtra.” This apocryphal Chinese work is *not* Brahmajāla S (D 1) of the Pali Canon. This Sūtra features both Shakyamuni Buddha and the cosmic Buddha Vairocana, and states the 10 major Bodhisattva precepts and 48 minor ones. The language of the text suggests that these precepts are for monastics who have chosen to become Bodhisattvas. See: [http://lotus-sutra.org/buddhist-ayurveda-encyclopedia/-brahma-net-sutra\\_brahmajala\\_fan-wang-jing.htm](http://lotus-sutra.org/buddhist-ayurveda-encyclopedia/-brahma-net-sutra_brahmajala_fan-wang-jing.htm).

<sup>170</sup> T24.1485, “The Sutra on the Original Deed that is the Garland of the Bodhisattva,” by Zhú Fóniàn (竺佛念, late 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> cent), has better organized and more comprehensive discussions of the Vinaya than the Brahmajāla Sūtra. See How Buddhism became Chinese, SD 40b (2.3.3; 2.3.7).

<sup>171</sup> See How Buddhism became Chinese, SD 40b (2.3.5; 4.3.3.2).

<sup>172</sup> See How Buddhism became Chinese, SD 40b (2.3.5; 4.3.3.4).

<sup>173</sup> On the Bodhisattva precepts, see How Buddhism became Chinese, SD 40b (2.3.7) & (4.3.3.4).



### 6.4.2 Is skilful means transmoral?

**6.4.2.1** It is understandable that during troubled times (such as in imperial China), Mahāyāna Buddhists were forced to resort to “skilful means” for latitude in adapting Buddhist doctrines and practices. Even at the height of its success, Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism, especially the urban or larger institutions, freely used skilful means in religious work and instructions. Theoretically at least, skilful means provided the sanction or latitude for the use of many seemingly proscribed, even unwholesome, practices, such as lying, theft, violence, and sexuality under the guise of religious instructions or to speed up enlightenment.

**6.4.2.2** The parable of the burning house (the Lotus Sutra, ch 3), for example, is not without its moral difficulties. When the Lotus Sutra Buddha spins a parable of a merchant who lures the children out of the burning by promising various kinds of carts and toys, but ends up giving them only one cart (the Buddha, -yāna): isn't he lying?<sup>174</sup> This point is easily debatable, and a number of other more suitable skilful means could have been used to get the children out of the burning house. It could be as simple as the wise merchant getting hold of the more mature children and showing them the fire, and these mature children go on to inform the rest, and so on.

**6.4.2.3** The use of harsh violence on one's disciples has occasionally been used as a means, as it were, of opening students' eyes to the nature of self or suffering. We have records of stories of Zen priests committing blatantly violent or crude acts to their pupils or in answer to some question. Here are a couple of examples from the Chan classic *Wúménguān*.<sup>175</sup>

The 3<sup>rd</sup> case of the *Wúménguān*, for example, records how Jùzhī Yīzhǐ (俱胝一指; Jap: Gutei Isshi), a 9<sup>th</sup> century Chan master cut off his pupil's finger, and the latter “was instantly enlightened.” Surely, this is merely a story.

The 14<sup>th</sup> case of the *Wúménguān* is about how the priest Nánquán Pǔyuàn (南泉普願 748-835; Jap: Nansen Fugan), seeing monks quarrel over cat, took hold of the cat and cut it into two, and then walked off with his sandals on his head! Is this a case of the Dharma being made to stand on its head?

In case 21, a monk asked Yúnmén, “What is Buddha?” Yúnmén replied, “A dry dung-stick!” (*gānshǐjué*; Jap *kanshiketsu*). Surely, this must be a story retold embarrassingly (or brazenly) out of its non-Buddhist context.<sup>176</sup>

**6.4.2.4** Surely, such stories (and this is probably what they really are) are meaningful and instructive to the culture that wrote them. They would otherwise be misunderstood, especially when taken out of their context. Let us now examine another kind of story.

### 6.4.3 Making bones of the Buddha.

**6.4.3.1** THE DOG-TOOTH RELIC. One of the commonest forms of skillful means is a story, which graphically drives home a point more effectively than a discursive explanation would. In such a case, the story

<sup>174</sup> See Donald Lopez, Jr, 1992; Lan Cole, 2005:134 f; Alan Cole, 2005: 134-143.

<sup>175</sup> The Gateless Gate (*Wúmén'guān* 無門關; Jap *Mumonkan*) is a collection of 48 koan anecdotes compiled by the Chinese Chan master Wúmén Huìkāi 無門慧開 (1183-1260) and published in 1229. These are encounters between various well-known Chinese Chan figures highlighting a decisive moment in their teaching. These condensed episodes are each accompanied by a short comment and poem by Hui-k'ai himself. The whole *Wúménguān* can be downloaded from <http://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/zen/mumonkan.htm>.

<sup>176</sup> On the influence of the *Zhuāngzi* 莊子 (a Daoist work), see How Buddhism became Chinese, SD 40b (5.1.2.8).

is like a finger pointing to the moon. However, it becomes problematic when the finger is mistaken for the moon, or worse, the finger is crooked. Take this well known story about **the dog-tooth relic**.

*A young peasant who went to Lhasa to trade, promised his mother that he would get her a relic from the Jowo statue of Sakyamuni Buddha.<sup>177</sup> He had such a good time in Lhasa that he forgot all about it until he was a few miles from home.*

*So ashamed was he that he picked up a tooth from a dead dog's skull lying in the ditch by the road, wrapped it in some elegant silk, put it in a gau (a Tibetan prayer box), and presented it to his mother. The old woman was delighted and prayed to it constantly. Soon she was regaling the neighbours with the tales of the blessings she was receiving from the fine relic her son had brought her. The son was embarrassed and also felt guilty about deceiving her.*

*One holiday, he was washing down by a stream, and he decided to confess his trick and disabuse the old woman of her delusion. The moment he came to this resolve, he looked up and saw the precious Jowo statue standing before him. The Buddha statue said to the awestruck peasant, "Young man, do not think your mother does not have a real relic. You forgot, but I remembered, and the dog's jaw was my manifestation. If you don't believe me, go quietly home and observe your mother's prayers!"*

*The son went home directly and quietly went in to his mother's shrine where she was praying. The reliquary was open and the silk unfolded. The tooth was shining with brilliant rainbow rays of light. When she died, she obtained a rainbow body and attained awakening.<sup>178</sup>*

I find this story very strained and troubling, to say the least. For a simple reason, it is based on an outright lie, even if it is a pious one. Can faith be an excuse for falsehood?<sup>179</sup> Such a story may be misconstrued that it is all right to lie, if it is to make someone happy. Perhaps, when we limit its moral to "filial piety," it is less of a moral problem. But still, it has polemic intentions.

The point is that there is, in fact, a better way for the story to end. I would have retold the story in this way. The young man returns home with the dog-tooth and openly tells his mother: "Mom, there are no more Buddha relics available in Bodhgaya. But I found this beautiful bone in the holy land. As you know if you regard this as symbolizing the Buddha, it becomes a relic 'image' (like a Buddha image)."

If the mother is a woman of faith, then, she would not be too concerned with this rationalization. It is from the holy land, anyway. Moreover, it is based on truth, and is not a commercializing attempt.

**6.4.3.2 THE 7.5 CM BUDDHA-TOOTH RELIC.** The Sunday Times (a leading Singapore newspaper) of 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2007 reported on the "Buddha" relic controversy involving the Buddha Relic Temple, whose abbot said something to this effect: Since I take it to be a Buddha relic, it is a Buddha relic. We might call this a "reifying" of the Buddha. Sadly, such an ultimatum tends to divide us into thinkers and nonthinkers, into wisdom versus faith.

There is an important difference between a "good" story and a "wholesome" story. A *good story* moves us into the author's bias; a *wholesome story* moves us to goodness. An author may be biased and bogged by greed, hate or delusion. Goodness, on the other hand, frees us from greed, hate, and delusion.

The point is that the word is not the thing. Otherwise, anyone reading the same word or words would come to the same conclusion. We each come to our own conclusions, depending on whether we

<sup>177</sup> The most sacred image in Tibet, housed in the Jokhang temple, Lhasa.

<sup>178</sup> See also WW Rowe et al, *A Dog's Tooth: A tale from Tibet*, Snow Lion, 1997.

<sup>179</sup> An affirmation to this is easier in a faith where God is supreme and we are only answerable to him, so that whatever we think, say or do here is somehow as result of his will, or at least he know what we are doing. As such, we are only answerable to him and no one else.

have greed, hate or delusion, or non-greed non-hate, non-delusion.<sup>180</sup>

The Sunday Times of 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2007 (already mentioned) carried a revealing article on the Buddha Relic Temple in Chinatown, Singapore, which houses a 7.5 cm “tooth,” which it claims to be that of the Buddha himself. The Sunday Times showed a picture of the tooth to various scientists and dentists. Four dentists, including two forensic dental experts, said the tooth could not have come from a human.

“This is an animal ‘cheek tooth,’ that is, a molar at the back of the mouth,” said Professor David K Whittaker, a forensic dental specialist at Cardiff University in Britain. The seemingly uneven biting surface is indicative of grass-eating animals whose teeth have “a very efficient grinding surface for breaking up coarse plant materials,” he said.

Dr Myra Elliott, a consultant oral and maxillofacial surgeon with a practice at Mount Elizabeth Medical Centre, Singapore, said: “Even if human teeth have been fossilised, there’s still a pattern. And what is shown in the picture doesn’t look like a primate’s tooth at all.”

The size of the tooth—measuring 7.5cm—is also far too long for a human tooth, said Dr Anthony Goh, an oral and maxillofacial surgeon.

The ostentatious 5-storey Buddha Tooth Relic Temple was built at a cost of S\$59 million. More than 60,000 donors gave the temple \$45 million and 270kg of gold. The gold was melted and rebuilt into a 3.6m-high stupa to house the tooth relic.

According to Shi Fazhao, the abbot of Golden Pagoda Buddhist Temple, the founder of the Relic Temple, devotees must “follow the voice of your divine faith, and not merely rely on a checklist of qualities that a relic is supposed to have. For instance, a relic that possesses diamond-like qualities can still shatter into a hundred equal pieces under the hammer of a skeptic. One wonders why. Wasn’t the diamond-like relic supposed to have withstood the force of a hammer?”

Fazhao offers an explanation based on faith: The shattering result in fact is not indicative of the quality of the relic. It is due to the lack of faith, which will result in an anticipation of the shattering of the relic. Hence, the relic splits. However, instead of just breaking into irregular pieces, it breaks into 100 equal pieces to demonstrate the uniform, multiplying effect of relics. On the other hand, if one has faith in the relic, it would not have been put to the test in the first place. Therefore, the effect of an action imposed on a relic is really a function of one’s faith.

Shi Hsingyun,<sup>181</sup> founder of Fo Guang Shan, Taiwan, and President of Buddha’s Light International Association, similarly said, “If you have faith with the Buddha tooth relic, it will be authentic and will bestow blessings to you, if you have doubt, I do not think that it will give you any blessings at all.” In other words, believe and it will be so, have faith and be saved, or at least blessed (but by whom?).<sup>182</sup> The nature of religion is such that it facilitates such language and its benefits.

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<sup>180</sup> The story of the dog-tooth relic also appeared as as “The best stories are unfinished,” in Piya Tan, *Simple Joys*, Singapore, 2009: 10.12.

<sup>181</sup> Hsingyun (fully, 星雲大師 *Xīngyún Dàshī*) (1927- ) is perhaps the world’s wealthiest billionaire priest, and has put his wealth to good use by building an international chain of temples. Soon after the building of Foguang Shan, most parts of Taiwan had their own Fo Guang Shan branch temple. Overseas, Hsi Lai Temple (USA), Nan Tien Temple (Australia), and Nan Hua Temple (South Africa) are among the biggest branch temples. Fo Guang Shan branch temples are found in the United States, Canada, Brazil, Japan, Hong Kong, Thailand, Malaysia, Australia (Brisbane and Wollongong), France, the Netherlands, South Africa, New Zealand, Singapore, and the United Kingdom. Politically, he supports the “one China” policy and reconciliation between the Dalai Lama and China. For a study of Hsingyun himself, see André Liberté 2004 esp 66-85 (ch 4).

<sup>182</sup> Despite what has been discussed here it might still be difficult for some to understand why all this should be happening in the name of religion. The point here I think is that we can better understand what is going on if we use the “business model” of such “Buddhist” work: see Three Roots Inc, SD 31.12 (3.4.1) & Mahā, parinibbāna S (D 16), SD 9 Afterword (3) (Monastic business).

#### 6.4.4 Liberating all being, or no beings to be liberated?

**6.4.4.0** The Mahāyāna idea of putting love and compassion above moral virtue and religious precepts appears to be refreshingly noble. Such an idea is then paired the idea of skilful means to save or liberate all beings. A Mahāyāna Bodhisattva is often said to be one who vows not to become enlightened or not to enter nirvana (apparently, in this teaching, such a being has the choice to do so, unlike an arhat of early Buddhism), until all beings are liberated from suffering.

**6.4.4.1** HISTORICAL PROBLEM. There are, however, a few serious problems with such a theology.<sup>183</sup> Firstly, there is a *historical* problem, as this is a radical innovation. Nowhere in the early canon do we find such an idea. Even the Buddha himself does not make such a vow. So how did this idea arise?

The idea is certainly a reinterpretation of the 3 kinds of awakening, that is, full self-awakening (*sammā sambodhi*), individual awakening (*pacceka bodhi*) and disciple awakening (*sāvaka bodhi*), or the awakening of the fully self-awakened Buddha, the Pratyeka Buddha, and the arhat.<sup>184</sup> These three are types of liberation depending on the circumstances of the individual's awakening. They are not different ideals to be pursued by personal choice.<sup>185</sup>

However, after the Buddha's time, the Bodhisattva (P *bodhisatta*) concept was reinterpreted by the Mahāyāna as a spiritual career that anyone could aspire to, and should indeed do so, and to reject the other two awakenings as being "selfish." Interestingly, this new ideal arose *pari passu* with the decline dhyanic meditation in mainstream Buddhism.<sup>186</sup> This theme is dramatically emphasized in such Mahāyāna works as the Lotus Sutra.<sup>187</sup> [7.3]

**6.4.4.2** PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEM. Secondly, there is a *psychological* problem of **death denial**.<sup>188</sup> It is interesting to see that both the post-Buddha Mahāyānists and the post-Jesus Christians deified their respective teachers, refusing to accept the fact that their teachers had died. The less awakened faithful went through a long phase of denial after their great teachers had died. The best explanation for such a deification or apotheosis is that in both cases the posthumous faithful could not accept their respective lord's death: they went through a prolonged period of *death denial*. Indeed, we might say that even today, there are many who are still in denial of the deaths of their respective lords.

A serious psychological problem of not letting go of the dead is that we continue to live with a *mental construct* of that person we adore. This is an important explanation for the rise of sectarianism: different sects, groups and individuals, have different reasons and needs for a superhuman source of present succour and after-life security. So we create Buddha and God in our own image.

**The Gāraṇa Sutta** (S 6.2) relates how the newly-awakened Buddha declares that the Dharma is his teacher, worthy of his reverence.<sup>189</sup> The term *satthā* (teacher) is here redefined: while the Buddha lives,

<sup>183</sup> I have used "theology" here as referring to an idea reflecting external salvation, but it has a broader sense: see esp Roger Jackson & John J Makransky, *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars*, London: Routledge, 1999.

<sup>184</sup> Dhamma, pāla mentions the great bodhisattva (*mahā, bodhisatta* or *mahā, sambodhisatta*), the individual bodhisattva (*pacceka, bodhisatta*) and the disciple bodhisattva (*sāvaka, bodhisatta*) (ThaA 1:9-12; also UA 58); also T Endo, "Bodhisattas in the Pāli Commentaries," *Bukkyo Kenkyu (Buddhist Studies)* 25 1996: 65-92, esp 82 ff.

<sup>185</sup> See SK Nanayakkara 1971, in Ency Bsm: "Bodhi."

<sup>186</sup> See eg Bad friendship, SD 64.17 (Zen is not dhyana).

<sup>187</sup> For an insightful study on the bodhisattva concept, see Jeffrey Samuels, "The Bodhisattva ideal in Theravāda Buddhist theory and practice," 1997; also Lewis R Lancaster, "The Bodhisattva concept: A study of the Chinese Buddhist canon," 1981.

<sup>188</sup> See Mahā, parinibbāna S (D 16), SD 9 Intro (9) & Miraculous Stories, SD 27.5b (6.2).

<sup>189</sup> S 6.2/1:138-140 @ SD 12.2.

he is teacher; after his passing, the role is found in *the Dharma and Vinaya*. With the Buddha's passing, Buddhism ceases to be a *cult* (where the teacher or leader is the final authority) and becomes a *spiritual method* or *teaching-centred path*.<sup>190</sup> In this sense, it may be said that **the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16) is the Buddha's last will and testament to his spiritual heirs.

On the other hand, while the religious and faith-inclined accept that the Buddha's authority and presence have been *spiritually* transferred to the Dharma and Vinaya, they also perceive that he is "*physically*" transferred into his relics, the stupa and the Buddha image.<sup>191</sup> The Buddha has been deified.

For those who follow pre-sectarian Buddhism or the oral teachings of the Pali Canon, the Buddha has attained final nirvana: *he is dead*.<sup>192</sup> They know too that arhats have no difficulties whatsoever with the Buddha's passing, as the arhats have a direct experience of true reality. For such Buddhists, the Buddha's final miracle is that he *lived* for us—and for a full 45 years of public ministry, and died at the ripe old age of 80, after the community of monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen—that is, the community of noble saints—had been fully established.

**6.4.4.3 DOCTRINAL PROBLEM.** Thirdly, there is a *doctrinal* problem. The Mahāyāna Bodhisattva is often said to vow that he would not enter nirvana until *all* beings are liberated. Usually "all" would refer to *all* the beings in the three periods of time. Let us here limit the "all" only to those beings from the time the vow is taken until the indefinite future.

Even then, the notion of saving all beings is difficult to fathom. In fact, it is a meaningless statement. For, it is clear from the Buddha's teaching that samsara has neither beginning nor end, as stated in a series of suttas called **the Mātā Sutta** (A 15.14), **the Pitā Sutta** (A 15.15), **the Bhātā Sutta** (A 15.16), **the Bhaginī Sutta** (A 15.17), **the Putta Sutta** (A 15.18) and **the Dhitā Sutta** (A 15.19).<sup>193</sup>

Bhikshus, this samsara [cyclic life and death] is without beginning nor ending. A beginning point of beings roaming and wandering on, fettered by ignorance, fettered by craving, cannot be discerned.

(S 15.14/2:189, 15.15/2:189, 15.16/2:189, 15.17/2:189,  
15.18/2:190, 15.19/2:190 @ SD 57.2-7)

However, it is easier to conceive Mahāyāna Bodhisattva's total salvation of beings in terms of the doctrines of non-self (*anātman*) or emptiness (*śūnyatā*). That is, to say, in reality there are *no* beings to be saved (as evident, for example, from the Heart Sutra). In that case, this is saying nothing new: there are really no beings to be saved, but I am saving all beings anyway! Although the thought is very noble indeed, this particular means (*upāya*) is not very skilful, but a pious tautology.

## 7 A skilful approach to the Buddhisms

From what we have discussed so far, and from the works of a growing number of specialist scholars, we can say that "it is fair ... to speak of a 'paradigm shift' by which the Mahāyāna recalibrated the value-structure of the Small Vehicle." (Keown 1992: 130). In this light, the question now is how should (or could) a non-Mahāyānist, especially a practitioner of early Buddhism, look at the Mahāyāna? A couple of

<sup>190</sup> See Cult Buddhism, SD 34.5.

<sup>191</sup> See Ray 1994: 348-352, 364. On Gopaka Moggallāna S (M 108), see foll §6.2 n.

<sup>192</sup> This is of course speaking in worldly terms. On the ultimate level, in Dharma language, the Buddha cannot be said to living or dead, or both or neither: see Nivāpa S (M 25,10/1:157 f); Cūḷa Māluṅkya,putta S (M 63,2-3/1:426-428); Aggi Vaccha,gotta S (M 72,9-12/1:483 f, 72.20/1:487 f).

<sup>193</sup> This famous statement is actually found in every sutta of Anamatagga Saṃyutta (S 15.1-20/2:178-193).

helpful answers are possible, and worth considering in our efforts to resolve or wisely accept the differences between Mahāyāna and early Buddhism.

**7.1 A FAMILY OF RELIGIONS.** Firstly, instead of seeing Buddhism as a monolithic system, we should understand it to be a *family* of Buddhisms, each with its own “operating system” (like a computer), or terminology, doctrines and practices. The forest monastics would then be simple country cousins, the suburban Theravāda monastics are wealthy city cousins, and the Mahāyāna as the affluent and flamboyant cousins in the upmarket commercial centre. Of course, this should all be taken with a light touch of Zen.

In this way, we could comfortably discuss and practise early Buddhist teachings. We could talk about Guanyin or about Zen *satori* in their own context without confusing terminologies. **Awakening** (*bodhi*), in the early Buddhist experience, for example, is the direct realization of true reality, where insight wisdom and moral virtue become naturally inalienable. Satori or “Zen enlightenment,” on the other hand, is a special Zen status that needs to be certified by a qualified lineage-master, probably a non-celibate priest from Japan. In short, it is a sort of religious franchise granted by a Zen master.

**7.2 CONTEXTUAL TERMINOLOGY.** Secondly, since early Buddhism and Mahāyāna are practically different operating systems, we need to use the terminologies of the two systems with care and clarity. We need to define our terms when talking about either of them (or any of their sects or sub-system or cult). The terms are not always synonyms.

The *koan* (*gōng’àn* 公案) is a good case in point. It is a characteristically Chinese invention, one that is permanently printed on the religious fabric of Chinese-based east Asian Buddhisms. Well known koan anthologies available in English include the *Blue Cliff Record* (Chin: *Bìyán Lù*; Jap: *Hekiganroku*), the *Book of Equanimity* or *Book of Serenity* (Chin: *Cōngróng Lù*; Jap: *Shoyoroku*), both compiled in their present forms in the 12<sup>th</sup> century; and *The Gateless Gate* (Chin: *Wúménguān*; Jap: *Mumonkan*) compiled in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

There are so-called “traditional answers” (*kenjō* 見処 or *kenge* 見解) to many koans, but they are only preserved as exemplary answers given by various masters during their own training. In reality, any answer could be correct, provided that it conveys proof of personal breakthrough agreeable to the master. Koan training can only be done with a certified teacher. In the Rinzai Zen school, which uses koans extensively, the teacher certification process includes an appraisal of proficiency in using that school’s extensive koan curriculum.

**Victor Hori**, a professor at McGill University, who has had extensive *kōan* training in Japanese temples, says that koan literature was partly influenced by the pre-Chan Chinese tradition of the “literary game,” a contest in improvised poetry.<sup>194</sup> Over centuries, contemporary collections continued to inspire commentaries, including modern commentaries. New koans, including humorous one, are occasionally invented, even today.<sup>195</sup>

As such, a koan should be accepted and understood uniquely Chán practice, with its roots not so much in Indian Buddhism as in Chinese culture.<sup>196</sup> It is a rich and profound Buddhist response to Chinese intellectual heritage. Koans do not bring about awakening (*bodhi*) in the Indian sense, but are useful

<sup>194</sup> See Victor Sogen Hori, *Zen Sand: The Book of Capping Phrases for Kōan Practice*, Honolulu, 2003 ch 4.

<sup>195</sup> See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/K%C5%8Dan>.

<sup>196</sup> It might even be said that the koan is specially meant to break the mindset incurred by Chinese related languages (Korean, Japanese and Vietnamese). The very first case in the *Wúménguān*, for example, would only make good sense in Chinese: A monk asks monk Zhàozhōu: “Has a dog the Buddha-nature or not?” Zhōu answered, “Wu!” (無). *Wu* here is a play on 無, which means both “woof!” and “empty.” Translating it as “woof!” misses the point. Indeed koans are neither meant to be translated nor explained.



mind tools, when skilfully used, help in breaking down mindsets and distractions, which may then clear the way for better mental focus, joy and clarity.<sup>197</sup>

**7.3 MAHĀYĀNA AS LITERATURE.** Thirdly, we could regard the Mahāyāna (or any religious canon, for that matter) as *literature*. Two books have appeared recently in this connection to give us some idea how this approach can be beneficial. The first book is Alan Cole's *Text as Father* (Berkeley, 2005) and the second is Ralph Flores' *Buddhist Scriptures as Literature* (New York, 2008).

**7.3.1 Alan Cole's** book, *Text as Father: Paternal seductions in early Mahāyāna Buddhist literature*, is a beautifully and intellectually humorous work, not always easy to read for those without a literary inclination. It sheds new light on the origins and nature of Mahāyāna with close readings of four well-known texts—the Lotus Sutra, the Diamond Sutra, the Tathāgata,garbha Sūtra, and the Vimāla, kīrti Nirdeśa. All these texts were written some 400-600 after the Buddha's death (2005:340-345).

Cole discusses these Mahāyāna texts as literary works, rather than as philosophical or doctrinal treatises. He argues that these works were carefully crafted to undermine traditional monastic Buddhism, and to gain legitimacy and authority for the Mahāyāna as it moves away from the older oral and institutional forms.

Cole argues that the narrative structures and seductive literary strategies used in these texts suggest that they were specifically written to encourage devotion to the written word or the book, instead of other forms of authority, be they human, institutional or iconic. The Mahāyāna authors of the texts fabricated the Buddha's voice in an attempt to hide their own literary genius in relocating Buddhist authority and sanctity within these texts (2005: 338-340). The blurb on the dust jacket of the book says:

Written with finesse and humor, *Text as Father* yields fascinating insights into the play of form and content within these sūtras and offers substantial evidence for rethinking the genesis and role of concepts typically taken to be characteristics of Mahāyāna Buddhism—such as emptiness, compassion, and expedient means. At the same time, it also provides provocative material for reconsidering the larger problem of how texts alter the construction of religious meaning, intersubjectivity, and the horizons of tradition.

(Blurb on dust jacket of *Texts as Father*, 2005)

**7.3.2 Ralph Flores's** book, *Buddhist Scriptures as Literature: Sacred rhetoric and the uses of theory* (2008) is easier to read as the book's language is simpler than Cole's, and covers a wider range, in fact, the three main Buddhist traditions of Theravāda, Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna. Flores explores the drama, lyricism and compelling story-lines in the Buddhist texts, and shows how rhetoric and ideology work in shaping the reader's reactions.

Flores explores the legendary Buddha story as an archetypal quest-romance, where the regal setting is abandoned, and the ensuing feats are heroic. The Buddha legend can also be read as an epic, but also has a comic plot: the bodhisattva Siddhartha goes through confusions and trials until he becomes totally selfless in attaining nirvana. The blurb on the dust jacket of the book says:

Making use of contemporary literary theory, Flores offers new readings of texts such as the *Nikāyas*, the *Dhammapada*, the *Heart Sutra*, Zen koans, Shantideva's *Way of the Bodhisattva*, and the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Understanding these works as literature deepens our sense of the unfolding of their teachings, of their exuberant histories, and of their relevance for contemporary life.

(Blurb on dust jacket of *Buddhist Scriptures as Literature*, 2008)

<sup>197</sup> See further How Buddhism became Chinese, SD 40b (5.1.3).

Even at the start of his book, Flores wrote passionately about the importance of *reading* the Buddhist texts, something which even the Buddhists themselves apparently fail to do. After writing about the rise of Buddhist studies in the west (from at least 1820), many still “out of ignorance, fear, or missionary zeal, ... were unable to read Buddhist texts ... ”

What lingers on, though, in the reception of Buddhism in the West, is a tradition—from at least 1820 until recent times—of ignoring or misconstruing Buddhist scriptures, and using them as a launching pad to project common fears, hopes, or fantasies. Desire, in reading, wanders, and is far from direct sight, or insight. For many popular Western teachers today, a detailed study of the texts is frequently deemed unnecessary: close readings may be dispensed with, in favor of vague anecdotes about “what the Buddha says somewhere” or what he or his disciples are said to have done. Today, Buddhist teachings, despite a plethora of fine translations and exegeses, are still often read casually or ritualistically, or discussed in ways soothing to recent mindset. (Flores 2008: 2)

Clearly aware of modernist Buddhist attitudes to Buddhism itself, Flores quotes from **Slavoj Žižek**,<sup>198</sup> who says, “When it comes to religion, ... we no longer ‘really believe’ today, we just follow (some) religious rituals and mores as part of respect for the ‘lifestyle’ of the community to which we belong.”<sup>199</sup>

My own response to these words is that, as Buddhists, especially as non-westerners or as native believers, we need to delve deeper into the early Buddhist texts, into the earliest wellspring of our spirituality. And once there, we need to look for workable methods of heart-stilling and mind-clearing for the sake of our own self-knowledge and compassionate response to others.

### **7.3.3 Benefits of studying Buddhist scripture as literature**

**7.3.3.1** We need to look at these ancient texts with an open and curious mind. In other words, we could start by examining the early Buddhist texts as *literature*. The first benefit is an obvious one: *Buddhist texts are also literature*. The early suttas, for example, are a **literary records** of the Buddha and his teachings, and the lives of his great saints. They preserve valuable information on ancient Indian culture, helpful teachings, colourful imageries, inspiring stories and beautiful poetry.<sup>200</sup>

**7.3.3.2** Works such as the Milinda, pañha (the Questions of Milinda) are not only valuable documents of Buddhist history and philosophy, but also of Buddhist rhetoric, the art of beautiful and persuasive language. Milinda was said to be the Bactrian-Greek king Menander I Soter (165/155-130 BCE), ruler of the Indo-Greek kingdom in present-day Pakistan, who was the first documented westerner to convert to Buddhism. Like Milinda, many of us begin by examining Buddhist texts as literature. As we deeply connect with their teachings, they settle in our lives as spirituality.

**7.3.3.3** The second benefit is a pleasant one: *the texts can be very entertaining*. If we are willing to suspend our disbelief<sup>201</sup> and enjoy **stories and myths** such as Homer’s *Iliad*, Luó Guànzōng’s *The Ro-*

<sup>198</sup> Slavoj Žižek (1949- ) from Yugoslavia, is a Hegelian philosopher, Lacanian theoretical psychoanalyst, Marxist political thinker, film theorist, and cultural critic.

<sup>199</sup> S Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The perverse core of Christianity*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003.

<sup>200</sup> Flores 2008: 7-16.

<sup>201</sup> Buddhist stories often contain magical and extraordinary events, which require what the Lake poet, Samuel T Coleridge, calls the ability “to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith” (*Biographia Literaria*, 1817; ed G Watson, London, 1975, ch 14, 168 f).

*mance of the Three Kingdoms* (三国演义 *sānguó yǎnyì*), Tolkiens' *Lord of the Ring*, or George Lucas' *Star Wars* series, and literary classics and TV serials, we could easily do the same for Buddhist texts, which are essentially stories of the Buddha's teachings.

**7.3.3.4** The suspension of disbelief here allows us to look deeper, even beyond beautiful or informative literature, into the wider archetypal dimensions or *psychological perspectives* of the Buddha's teachings. These are very useful in helping us understand our personality, mental processes and social realities. When explaining such abstruse concepts and points, the Buddha often uses "images that matter more than extended arguments; often, when he is making an abstruse or repeated point, we wait impatiently for an example or story." (Flores, 2008: 7)

**7.3.3.5** The Pali canon itself contains very little reference to the Buddha's life. Much of the Buddha story we are familiar with are the creative labour of commentators and later bards. A complete story of the Buddha, for example, appears as Aśva,ghoṣa's *Buddha,carita* (2<sup>nd</sup> cent), regarded as the greatest work in Sanskrit epic literature. As an epic, the Buddha story is a valuable case study of our collective consciousness as well as our personal quest for self-understanding and awakening. (Flores 2008: 15-33)

**7.3.3.6** Thirdly, we benefit from an understanding how *language* is used. The early Buddhist texts often use **hyperboles**, even magical images. Flores explains:

It should come as no surprise that language of religion is in general hyperbolic, or marked by a blessed excess. It may be a tool for persuasion and ideology, but it also is more than that. Stephen Webb observes that today we live in a world in which discourse has become flat, rational, technical, and uninspired. The figure of hyperbole, intimately connected with religion, inspire us, by contrast, "to imagine more than we know, say more than we dare to believe, act more than is wise and rational, see more than realism displays."<sup>202</sup> (Flores 2008: 13)

**7.3.3.7** Good literature not only entertains, leaves us with a good feeling, but reminds us of the limitations of language. The words (*vyañjana*) of the text try to shape momentarily the formlessness, give sound to the silent music and stillness, of meaning or goal (*attha*) of the Buddha's teaching. Here is where literature ends, as it were, and we begin an inward journey into the stillness of our hearts to bathe in the clear light of awakening.

## CONCLUSION

### 8 The true nature of skilful means

#### **8.1 THE ABUSE OF SKILFUL MEANS**

**8.1.1** Despite the growing ubiquity of Buddhism in the cities of the world and its impact on a rapidly growing number of people of other religions, those who take Buddhism least seriously, or take it for granted, seems to be the Buddhists themselves. In Singapore, for example, the Buddha's presence is measured in mundane public activities and million-dollar budgets, and the average monastic lives comfortably as the nouveau noblesse (the new nobility), tax-free and privileged.

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<sup>202</sup> Stephen Webb, *Blessed Excess: Religion and the hyperbolic imagination*, Albany, NY: SUNY, 1993: xiii.

Buddhist ideology and ritualism are used to draw in monastic workers (many of whom are well paid by moneyed monastics) and supporters. Monastics routinely use social work as a skilful means for re-spectability, which in turn attract generous funds and support for their palatial monasteries and comfortable lifestyle, which are already well supported by services to the dead.<sup>203</sup>

**8.1.2** Mega-temples are likely to loom in the Buddhist landscape once Buddhism gains influence or re-spectability. Like some of the Japanese new religions, such edifices are often funded by pious or pressed affluent businessmen or the moneyed faithful. The reality is that they are only as good as their money: they are really *religious balloons bloated up with the money-wind*. Once the donations slow down or an irregularity is exposed, the balloon is deflated, passing the bad air onto the Buddhist community as a whole. This is “bubble Buddhism.”

**8.1.3** A classic example of skillful means gone awry is the high-profile scandal involving the Singapore CEO priest Shi Mingyi (Goh Kah Heng), abbot of a number of wealthy temples in Singapore, Malaysia, and Hong Kong. In 2007-2009, the Straits Times reported on the police’s Commercial Affairs Department (CAD) investigation of Mingyi’s misappropriation of funds meant for the Renci Hospital, a Buddhist charity and second largest charity under the Ministry of Health’s purview. He had wrongfully directed funds to his own companies and young male assistant. His passport was impounded, pending investigations and his position was replaced (ST 20 Feb 2008: H2).

This very painful case of Mingyi speaks for itself, where the Mahāyāna conception of skilful means had fallen to a profoundly immoral low. But this is only the iceberg’s tip. For, when the prosecutor questioned Mingyi, “Is it okay for Buddhist monks to have properties in various parts of the world? Is that what a modern monk does?”

“There are many people who have that,” he ominously replied; that is, to say, there were many other Mahāyāna moneytheistic clergy like him.

Buddhists are generally forgiving, but many were deeply saddened in that he showed no remorse whatsoever throughout the trials. And after the sentence was passed, when a reporter asked for his response, he simply replied, “Life goes on.”<sup>204</sup>

On 21 Nov (a day after the Singapore Buddhist Federation celebrated its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary with the official opening of its new premises, attended by the Prime Minister), Mingyi, 47, was sentenced to 10 months’ jail, and his close aide (34-year old Raymond Yeung), to 9 months.<sup>205</sup>

## 8.2 PUTTING BUDDHIST MONEY IN THE RIGHT PLACES

**8.2.1** A hallmark of monastic renunciation is that it is a life of *poverty*, that is, of not indulging in any kind of economic engagement, so that he is able to channel all his energies, physical and mental, to spiritually productive goals, the highest of which is awakening in this life itself. Incumbent on such a lifestyle is a life of simplicity, celibacy and righteousness.

<sup>203</sup> See eg Mark Michael Rowe, “Death by association: Temples, burial, and the transformation of contemporary Japanese Buddhism,” Ann Arbor, MI: UMI, 2007: for diss, 2006, see <http://www.scribd.com/doc/19151495/Death-by-association-Temples-burial-and-the-transformation-of-contemporary-Japanese-Buddhism>.

<sup>204</sup> On the cases of the 2009 monks Mingyi and Meow Ee, see Money and monastics, SD 4.19 (9.3).

<sup>205</sup> See <https://www.asiaone.com/News/AsiaOne%2BNews/Singapore/Story/A1Story20091008-172427.html> & [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shi\\_Ming\\_Yi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shi_Ming_Yi). For another case of money controversy involving another Singaporean cleric, Shih Meow Ee, over a building project, see <https://www.supremecourt.gov.sg/docs/default-source/module-document/judgement/2003-sghc-300.pdf>. On the Buddha’s injunctions against monastics dealing with money, see Money and Monastics, SD 4.19, esp (9.3). For further details, see **The 3 Roots Inc**, SD 13.12 (3.4.4).

Outside of monastic renunciation is the world of the morally virtuous and economically productive lay disciple. He is admonished to work hard, enjoy the fruits of that labour, to be free from debts, and from blame,<sup>206</sup> and to understand all this as a preparation for a spiritual life that would end in stream-winning in this life itself.<sup>207</sup>

And beyond this circle of virtuous and successful Buddhist laity is the wealthy class, on account of social status (politicians and civil servants), learning (teacher, scholars, doctors, etc) or finance (businessmen, financiers, etc). Often enough, especially where such class members have surplus income and time (and they usually have), they are fondly drawn to dabble in some publicly significant Buddhist activity, and usually have little, if any, proper Buddhist training or experience.

**8.2.2** Indeed, where Buddhist education is weak, Buddhist realities and knowledge are defined and controlled by affluent, business or power-based interest groups or individuals (such as a cult leader). And in such a community, controlled by the wealthy or the few, the plutocracy (rule by the rich) can easily collapse into a kleptocracy (rule by thieves), where the power-holders attempt to attract and own as much public funds as possible.

A kleptocratic person or organization is usually thoroughly corrupt, has very little real productivity and its activities unstable. Just as kleptocratic states sooner or later fall, kleptocratic Buddhist individuals and institutions, too, will sooner or later fall. However, while it is a public joy to see a corrupt state fall, it is generally devastating to see a corrupt Buddhist leader or misguided group fall.

**8.2.3** For this reason, the Buddha has from the very start had nothing to do with personal wealth, and instructs his monastics to do the same.<sup>208</sup> Mahayānā monastics, like any other monastics, need to renounce money-making and materialism and return to Dharma-spirited training. Skillful means is *not* about money, success, pleasure or power. Skillful means is not a façade of social work as a means to attract funds.

Skillful means is about working hard to attain a high level of spirituality so that we are able to deploy our scarce karmic resources wisely, that is, effectively and wholesomely, for the benefit of as many beings as possible. And in doing so, we learn more about ourselves, and how we can hasten our pace towards awakening in this life itself.

**8.2.4** Financial and material wealth will surely and totally destroy a monastic: a wealthy monastic is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms, and a brazen transgression of the Buddha's teachings. The financial wealth of Buddhism should be managed by wise and honest laity, who should direct the funds towards social work projects and educational programmes, depending on which is more urgent at that time, and to support the monastics, who should be few and good.

In this way, worldly wealth plays an effective and wholesome role in our task of working towards social wellbeing and personal awakening. When we do Dharma-spirited work, we will create wholesome conditions to attract all the help we need, but the true goal is still our own liberation and awakening.

<sup>206</sup> See Anaṇa S (A 4.62/2:69 f @ SD 2.2; also Dīgha, jānu S (A 8.54/4:281-285), SD 5.10.

<sup>207</sup> See (Anicca) Cakkhu S (S 25.1/3:225), SD 16.7.

<sup>208</sup> See Money & monastics, SD 4.19-23.

### 8.3 THE ETHICS OF SKILFUL MEANS

#### 8.3.1 Misuse of skilful means

**8.3.1.1** Why is Mahāyāna monasticism in our times rife with spiritual materialism, of which the Ming-yi case is just the tip of the iceberg? One possible explanation is the misinterpretation of the notions of compassion and skilful means. Another catalyst is the use of unguarded stories or tales that could be construed to condone moral breaches.

**8.3.1.2 The Upāya, kauśalya Sūtra**, for example, gives accounts where breaches of precepts are apparently justified. In an apocryphal story of the Buddha's past lives, it is said that he was a celibate religious student (*brahma, cāri*) but he consented to sexual intercourse with a girl who threatened to kill herself out of love for him! (Chang 1983:453). This Sūtra is neither found in the early Buddhist texts nor does it reflect their spirit. Indeed, such an act would be clearly seen as being unskilful and unwholesome.

**8.3.1.3** Another story from the same Sūtra (not found in the early Buddhist texts) tells how the “Buddha” in a past life killed a man to prevent him from killing 500 other Bodhisattvas. He consequently fell into the lowest hell, staying there for a long time. He nevertheless willingly underwent such sufferings to save not only the 500 but also the potential murderer from terrible karmic fruits. (Chang 1983:456 f)<sup>209</sup>

**8.3.1.4** Here again, it is important to note that such stories are apocryphal, not found in the early canon. Just because there are such stories does not mean that they are historically true events, or even religiously allowable or exemplary acts. They should be taken as *literature* [7.3], which may or may not be helpful in a discussion of moral dilemmas, such as Buddhist soldiers defending their country against invaders.<sup>210</sup>

Again, it must be stressed here that such stories try to throw some light over various moral dilemmas, though the light seems to blind us rather than show us what's right and good. They reflect a new development in later Buddhism, a new problem that clearly differs from, even reject, the teachings of the historical Buddha.

It would be instructive to discover their proper backgrounds and contexts: who wrote these stories and why? Could such stories have been written by Buddhist domesticated and secularized by worldly wealth and patronage, even obliged to them—a familiar situation today in Mahāyāna Buddhism?<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> For monastics, the 4 “defeats” (*pārājika*)—killing a human being or abetting suicide, any kind of sexual act, taking the not-given (worth about 5 cents or more), or claiming to possess higher attainment—automatically makes one lose one's monastic status. Other monastic offences are amenable to restitution through various means, so that the offender becomes contrite and is rehabilitated as a bona fide monastic. The more serious monastic rules constitute both natural morality and conventional morality. It could be said that other than the Pārājika (4 rules) and Saṅghādisesa (13 rules), all the other 210 rules for the monks constitutes only conventional morality (they were instituted by the Buddha or the sangha), and as such the offender could be restituted through confession, or other disciplinary measures. Technically, such rules may be adjusted in an appropriate manner, or even abrogated in some cases, by the sangha. For the laity, the 5 precepts constitute *natural morality*, which means that any intentional breach entails karmic accountability. See also Paul Williams, 2000:170 f.

<sup>210</sup> Indeed, the Mahāyāna justification for killing by a Bodhisattva has been used by the Chinese Communists to persuade Chinese Buddhists to take part in the class war and support the People's Liberation Army. See H Welch, *Buddhism Under Mao*, Cambridge, MA, 1972: 284-287; cf P Demiéville, *Choix d'études bouddhiques (1929-1970)*, Leiden, 1973: 261 ff.

<sup>211</sup> See further Peter Harvey 2000:134-140.



### 8.3.2 Self-righteousness is not skilful means

**8.3.2.1** Compassion unguided by wisdom easily make pious fools of us, fearing bad karma even in criticizing evil and wrong, and so we become easy lackeys of the cunning and canny.<sup>212</sup> Wisdom untempered by compassion turns us into cunning talking heads who would give the best explanations for a problem without raising a finger to solve it.<sup>213</sup> We need to have a right balance of wisdom and compassion when examining or executing a skilful means.

**8.3.2.2** With such an understanding let us now examine an oft-quoted off-colour Zen story; indeed, popular enough to be cited by even non-Buddhists as their own:<sup>214</sup>

Two Zen monks, Tanzan and Ekido, traveling on pilgrimage, came to a muddy river crossing. There they saw a lovely young woman dressed in her kimono and finery, obviously not knowing how to cross the river without ruining her clothes. Without further ado, Tanzan graciously picked her up, held her close to him, and carried her across the muddy river, placing her onto the dry ground.

Then he and Ekido continued on their way. Hours later they found themselves at a lodging temple. And here Ekido could no longer restrain himself and gushed forth his complaints:

“Surely, it is against the rules what you did back there ... . Touching a woman is simply not allowed ... . How could you have done that? ... And to have such close contact with her! ... This is a violation of all monastic protocol ... ”

Thus he went on with his verbiage. Tanzan listened patiently to the accusations.

Finally, during a pause, he said, “Look, I set that girl down back at the crossing. Are you still carrying her?” (Based on an autobiographical story by Japanese Zen master Tanzan)

**8.3.2.3** Tanzan (1819-1892) was a Japanese Buddhist priest and professor of philosophy at the Japanese Imperial University (now the University of Tokyo) during the Meiji period. He was regarded as a Zen master, and figured in several well-known koans, and was also well-known for his disregard of many of the precepts of everyday Buddhism, such as dietary laws.<sup>215</sup>

The first thing we should note is that this is an autobiographical Zen story; it probably did *not* happen, not exactly in this manner, anyway. For if it did, then, it would have a serious ethical problem, where one

<sup>212</sup> Two examples of such a person, according to Sigāl’ovāda S (D 31,15/3:185), are the sweet-talker (*anuppiya, bhāṇī*, lit “speaker of what is pleasant”), one who says what others like to hear, one who is politically correct at best, a flatterer, a toady, and the destructive companion (*apāya, sahāya*, lit “a companion who leads one to loss”); Comy: “a companion who brings about loss of wealth” (*bhogānaṃ apāyesu sahāyo hoti*, DA 3:948), a wastrel. Qu at J 2:390,19\*.

<sup>213</sup> Two examples of such a person, according to Sigāl’ovāda S (D 31,15/3:185), are the downright taker (*añña-d-atthu, haro*, lit “one who merely takes away”) the out-and-out robber, and the mere talker (*vacī, paramo*, lit “who is word at best”), “a man of much profession” (DPL), one who merely pays lip-service, an empty vessel, an insincere person.

<sup>214</sup> This popular seems to have inspired a number of quotes and adaptations:

Daoist, <http://weblog.raganwald.com/2007/10/three-stories-about-tao.html>;

Jewish, [http://www.bethelsudbury.org/jewish\\_basics/text005.php3?page=735](http://www.bethelsudbury.org/jewish_basics/text005.php3?page=735);

Catholic, <http://www.fisheaters.com/twomonks.html>;

<sup>215</sup> Japanese Zen practitioners’ disregard for Buddhist precepts is proverbial, and which is psychologically compensated by their almost military ritual formalism. Compounded by the Japanese culture of face and silence, serious breach of human decency easily occurs, esp with Japanese master in the west. See eg the case of Shimano sensei: [http://www.thezensite.com/ZenEssays/CriticalZen/Aitken\\_Shimano\\_Letters.html](http://www.thezensite.com/ZenEssays/CriticalZen/Aitken_Shimano_Letters.html).

is seen as being good at the cost of the perceived evil or projected foolishness of another. I think it was the Irish playwright, George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), who was said to have quipped, “There are bad women because there are good women.”

There is no virtue in projecting the truly good as being bad, so that the truly bad looks good.

**8.3.2.4** Indeed, a Bodhisattva who is regarded as good or compassionate on account of the evil or lack of others would actually be a selfish person, as such a Bodhisattva would not be independently good. A true bodhisattva is one who, being himself a highly virtuous being, is capable of inspiring goodness in another, even to the bodhisattva’s disadvantage.

Tanzan’s self-told tale has a serious moral flaw if he made himself appear virtuous on account of Ekido’s concern for the Vinaya. Such a person as Ekido, however, was simply rare in Meiji Japan, where priests were as a rule non-celibate. As such, it was likely that Tanzan had invented a Vinaya-respecting monk as a foil for our self-righteousness.

**8.3.2.5** On the other hand, Tanzan’s tale also evinces his serious lack of understanding of the Vinaya rules. For, in a real-life situation, even a Vinaya-observing orthodox Theravada monk would help this lady in every way he could, or he would ask his colleague or some other suitable persons to help the woman. If a Vinaya-keeping monk has helped the woman, he has done a good deed by breaking a minor rule, for which he only needs to confess before another monk, and remind himself not to wander into improper places the next time. There is no need of any skilful means here, only common sense.

### **8.3.3 Incelibacy amongst Japanese clergy**

**8.3.3.1** An interesting, but troubling, feature of Japanese Buddhism (and Japanese religion in general) is that non-celibacy is the norm. Why is this so? The first explanation is a *legal* one. In 1872, the Meiji government promulgated a terse law that stated: “From now on Buddhist clerics shall be free to eat meat, marry, grow their hair, and so on.

Furthermore, there will be no penalty if they wear ordinary clothing when not engaged in religious activities.”<sup>216</sup> Known informally as the *nikujiki saitai* 肉食妻帯 (“meat-eating and marriage”) law, it was introduced to incapacitate or at least weaken Buddhism as a political and social force in Japan. This decriminalizing measure triggered a century-long debate in the Japanese Buddhist world, as clerical leaders and rank-and-file clerics strove to interpret and respond to their new legal context.<sup>217</sup>

**8.3.3.2** Secondly, there is a *cultural* explanation: with the disestablishment of Buddhism in the Meiji era (1868-1912), Japanese monastics lost most of their lay patronage and were forced to support themselves and their temples in more mundane ways. Today, except for young monks under training, nearly all Japanese priests lead married lives.<sup>218</sup> Under such conditions, the Japanese clergy had no choice but to accept the law, and have since, as a rule, been living incelibate<sup>219</sup> and effectively lay-like lives.

<sup>216</sup> Date, 1930: 621 (qu in Jaffe 2002, see foll).

<sup>217</sup> See Richard Jaffe, *Neither Monastic Nor Layman: Clerical marriage in modern Japanese Buddhism*, Princeton, 2002: 4, see <http://press.princeton.edu/chapters/s7171.html>. & <http://www.nanzan-u.ac.jp/SHUBUN-KEN/publications/jirs/pdf/512.pdf>.

<sup>218</sup> The term “priest” here applies to the non-celibate clergy while “monk” refers to the ordained who keep to the rule of celibacy. See Yoshiharu Tomatsu, “The Secularization of Japanese Buddhism,” *Think Sangha Journal* 1,1 Winter 1998: 46-56.

<sup>219</sup> This word is found neither in the OED nor the Merriam Webster; but the sense is clear, being a backformation from (n) “incelibacy,” which is the opp of “celibacy.”

**8.3.3.3** The cultural context of Buddhism often decisively shapes it, so that it veers significantly away from the Indian roots. In Míng China, as we have seen [6.4.1], when Chinese Buddhist monastics were not allowed to ordain and various restrictions were made on Buddhism, Chinese Buddhist had to resort to various skilful means. So too in Japan, we see similar restrictions, with which the Japanese clergy and laity have to contend with.

**8.3.3.4** However, outside of their sphere of influence, such cultural realities should not be imported nor smuggled into the local community. Indeed, under contemporary conditions and the current Buddhist ecumenism (greater global Buddhist connectivity and cooperation), and the availability of the early Buddhist texts and culture, Japanese Buddhism has a new chance to regenerate or rejuvenate itself into a socially and spiritually significant Buddhist culture.

#### **8.3.4 Bāhiya's honesty**

**8.3.4.1** On the other hand, in a situation where Buddhism is successful and respectable, and as such lucrative, a different situation might arise. For those who, for any reason, feel a deep need for being the centre of attention, the monastic garb can be alluring. Once they don the monastic outfit, they miss out on the basic tutelage (minimum of 5 years of training with an experienced teacher), and go on their own steam as a guru, giving personal teachings propelled by a personal agenda (such as childhood conditionings).<sup>220</sup>

The crowd generally respect, love, or fear a uniform, and the monastic robe is perhaps the oldest uniform there is. The aroma of crowd adoration can be so intoxicating for some that they fail to see their own psychological and other inadequacies, deluded by the idea that they have attained a high spiritual level on account of crowd adoration. As the saying goes, such self-deluded gurus are only sitting uneasily on a high elephant before their fall.<sup>221</sup>

**8.3.4.2** We have an inspiring early Buddhist story of **Bāhiya** who does not exploit his religious status, and which also shows us how he applies skilful means. The arhat Bāhiya, in his last life, is born into the family of a householder of a town of the same name, Bāhiya or Bhārukaccha (modern Broach). In due course, he becomes a trader, voyaging in a ship. On the eighth occasion, he is shipwrecked and, floating on a plank, he is washed ashore near Suppāraka.<sup>222</sup>

Having lost all his clothes in the waters, he makes himself a bark dress, and goes about, with a bowl in hand, for alms in Suppāraka. People, seeing his bark dress and demeanour, pay him homage, taking him for a holy man. Although they offer him costly robes and many other luxuries, he refuses them all and so his fame grows all the more. Because of his bark dress he comes to be known as **Dāru, cīriya**, “the bark-dressed.” (UA 77)

**8.3.4.3** In due course, Bāhiya thinks that he has attained arhathood, but a brahma (a Suddhāvāsa deva who was a colleague in a past life), tells him not to think so, and to see the Buddha. Bāhiya immediately leaves for Sāvātthi, a great distance away. But when he arrives, the Buddha is in the city on alms-round.

<sup>220</sup> See the study of the self-propelled monk, Abhinyana: **The wanderers of today**, SD 24.6a.

<sup>221</sup> Buddhaghosa, using a simile, says that falling from training in a non-Buddhist system is like falling from the back of the donkey: one is, at worst, covered with dust; but falling from monastic training is like falling from the back of an elephant, that is, where one has freely taken up the rules of training but fails to keep to them. (MA 4:165).

<sup>222</sup> Suppāraka (Skt Śūrpāraka), today called Sopāra (or Supāra), in the district of Ṭhāna, near modern Mumbai, Maharashtra state. See Puṇṇ'ovāda S (M 145), SD 20.15(3).

Bāhiya follows the Buddha there and implores him to teach him the Dharma. Twice he asks and twice the Buddha refuses, saying that it is not the time for teaching. But Bāhiya insists, saying that life is uncertain, and that the Buddha or he may die, as a result of which he may not hear the Dharma.

**8.3.4.4** The Commentaries say that Bāhiya is excited by his meeting with the Buddha, and that the Buddha, gives him some time to regain his calm; hence, his initial refusal (UA 90). The Buddha then teaches him the proper method of regarding all sense experiences, that is, merely as objective phenomena. Even as he listens, Bāhiya became an arhat and the Buddha leaves him. Shortly afterwards, Bāhiya is gored to death by a cow with calf.<sup>223</sup>

**8.3.4.5** It is clear here that the Buddha's refusal not to teach Bāhiya has nothing to do with any Vinaya rules. The Pāṭimokkha has 16 rules listing the occasions when a monastic is prohibited from teaching the Dharma (Sekhiya 57-72),<sup>224</sup> and none of these apply here. The Buddha's hesitation here is merely a skilful means to rest and calm Bāhiya down as he is tired yet excited on meeting the Buddha. Through the Buddha's skilful means, Bāhiya realizes arhathood even as a layman.

## 8.4 THE SKILFUL MEANS OF ETHICS.

### 8.4.1 Skilful means is contextual

**8.4.1.1** The context of Mahāyāna teachings on skilful means must be carefully examined and understood. The true Bodhisattva is never an immoral or licentious person, and would never break any moral precept. **The Bodhi,cāry'āvatāra**, for example, says:

Thus, the self-born of the Conqueror, having firmly taken up the thought of enlightenment, should strive unfailingly never to violate the training (the precepts).

*Evaṃ grhītvā sudṛḍham bodhicittaṃ jin'ātmajaḥ | śikṣānatikrame yatnaṃ kuryān nityam atandritaḥ.*  
(Bodhi,cāry'āvatāra 4.1)

**8.4.1.2** However, in the next chapter of the same text, we see this apparently contradicting verse:

Having thus understood, he (the Bodhisattva) should always be diligent in the welfare of others. Even what is forbidden is allowable for one who sees the welfare of others with compassion.<sup>225</sup>

*Evaṃ buddhvā parārtheṣu bhavet satataṃ utthitaḥ | niṣiddham apy anujñātaṃ krpālor arthadarśiṇaḥ.*  
(Bodhi,cāry'āvatāra 5.84)

**8.4.1.3** This verse from **the Śikṣā,samuccaya** goes even further:<sup>226</sup>

"By deliberately becoming courtesans to attract men, enticing them with the lust's hook, they establish them in the Buddha-knowledge.

*Saṃcintya gaṇikāṃ bhonti puṃsāṃ ākarṣaṇāya te | rāgāṅku saṃlobhya buddhajñāne sthāpayanti te.*  
(Śikṣ ch 18, Cambridge MS f146b; Bendall 326)

<sup>223</sup> See (Arahatta) Bāhiya S (U 1.10/6-9), SD 33.7(2).

<sup>224</sup> Sekh 57-72 (V 4:200-205); see *The Pāṭimokkha* (ed W Pruitt; tr KR Norman, Oxford: PTS), 2001: 242-247.

<sup>225</sup> Here I have mainly followed Keown's tr (1992: 151).

<sup>226</sup> See Keown 1992: 150-156, 169-175.

**8.4.1.4** First of all, it is noteworthy that the possible breaches of precepts are stated as allowable only under very special circumstances, that is, where non-action or any other action would not have the wholesome effect of bringing the other part to the right path. Secondly, this is not a declaration that moral virtue does not matter. This training or this dispensation concerns only the Bodhisattva, that is, one who has a high level of spiritual attainment and self-control.

**8.4.1.5** The Mahāyāna is broad enough a tradition to wise above such unguarded stories which somehow were smuggled into print. The point is that the greater Mahāyāna teachings of wisdom, compassion and skilful means should be dissociated from such stories that could easily be used as an excuse for licence for a breach of the moral precepts and religious reductionism.<sup>227</sup>

As **Sean Nelson** insightfully observes in his review of Simon P James' *Zen Buddhism and Environmental Ethics* (2004),

The Buddhist notion of expedient or skillful means (*upāya kauśalya*) does not signify ethical relativism or nihilism but the situation-oriented appropriateness that openly and compassionately responds to things as they are. Compassion (*karuṇā*) is the central virtue or perfection to be cultivated and spontaneously generated. This responsive spontaneity overrides moral rules. Yet it is not relativistic arbitrariness if it is the *phronetic*<sup>228</sup> consequence of wisdom (*prajñā*) or the skillful manifestation of the virtue or perfection of Buddha-nature. (Sean Nelson 2005)

## **8.4.2 Beyond good and evil?**

**8.4.2.1** When are we really beyond good and evil? Only when we have become a Buddha or an arhat. Anyone else, whether human or divine, is still deeply influenced by the duality of good and evil of karmic fruition. We have discussed in the first part of this essay [1-4], we see how the Buddha uses skilful means to reach out and help others, and this is always done with wisdom and compassion, without any breach of moral virtue.

**8.4.2.2** To properly use skilful means, it is necessary to understand the difference between natural morality and conventional morality. **Natural morality** (*pakati sīla*) is how the nature of things, the universal true reality characterizing and underpinning all life, human and non-human, even above and beyond this world. Its reality is expressed socially as universal values, that is, *life, happiness, freedom, truth and wisdom*.

**Conventional morality** (*paññati sīla*), on the other hand, are rules and conduct introduced by some individual (such as teachers), group (a religious tribe) or institution (the government) that apply to others, as followers or members of a community. A Buddhist example is that of the monastic community, whose members have freely undertaken to observe such rules as promulgated by the Buddha and the early sangha, and which defines their legitimacy and authenticity as true practitioners of the Dharma.

<sup>227</sup> "Reductionism" is usu a derogatory term for analysing and describing a complex phenomenon in terms of its simple or fundamental constituents, especially when this is said to provide a sufficient explanation; eg, it is reductionist notion to claim that "Buddhism, after all, allows us to do anything we like." The point is that early Buddhism clearly speaks against the breaching of the 5 precepts.

<sup>228</sup> *Phronetic* is the adj of *phronesis*, which comes from the Greek philosopher Aristotle, who speaks of two kinds of wisdom, the theoretical (*sophia*) and the practical (*phronesis*) (*Nicomachean* 3.3, 1112b11, 1142a; *Ethics De Anima* 3): see Keown 1992: 205-210.

**8.4.2.3** Skilful means may breach convention and conventional morality, but should, as a rule, never breach natural morality, because it entails karmic accountability. There are occasions when natural morality may be breached by either party (eg between the perpetrator and the victim), say, when robbers are trying to kill our parents. We have to quickly decide how to act on the priority that that our parents' lives are safe. In doing so, we have to bear the karmic (or legal) consequences of warding off, even hurting, the robbers.

The same reasoning applies to soldiers defending the country under foreign attack. Surely, we would defend our country and loved ones to the end, even if we have to face the moral consequences of destroying the enemy. This is the purview of *situation ethics*, which deals with moral dilemmas, and not everyday cases.<sup>229</sup>

**8.4.2.4** The next important point to remember is that fully awakened persons, that is, **the arhats**, are truly beyond good and evil. This does not mean that *whatever* an arhat does is neither good nor evil, but that he would never commit an act that breaches moral virtue. An arhat, in other words, is naturally a wise and compassionate being.

**8.2.4.5** A key passage in **the Samaṇa,maṇḍikā Sutta** (M 78) is sometimes misconstrued as meaning that one who has attained nirvana or an arhat transcends ethical values, that he is “beyond good and evil.”<sup>230</sup>

And, carpenter, **where do these wholesome habits end without remains?**

Of their ending, too, it has been spoken: here, carpenter, a monk is *morally virtuous*, but he is *not made of moral virtue*,<sup>231</sup> and he understands, as they really are, the liberation of mind, liberation by wisdom, where these wholesome habits end without remains.

(M 78,11(3)/2:27), SD 18.9

**8.2.4.6** We have here an example of the language of awakening. The usage of *sīla,mayā* here is by way of “intentional language.”<sup>232</sup> *Sīla,maya* literally means “made of moral virtue,” but here used figuratively to mean that the arhat’s psychological and spiritual state is no more dependent on his karma, that is, good or bad actions; hence, he is “beyond good and evil.” In this sense, too, he does not identify (*tam-maya*)<sup>233</sup> with his precepts; for, there is really nothing to identify with, after all. On the other hand, the unawakened person, as a rule, identifies with his actions: “I am doing; this is *mine*; he is doing something to *me*,” and so on.<sup>234</sup>

### 8.4.3 Mahāyāna centres on emptiness

**8.4.3.1** If a Bodhisattva is capable of breaching natural morality, then he or she is not yet a fully awakened being. Historically, there are no such beings as the Mahāyāna Bodhisattvas; no one can willfully postpone awakening, which occurs when the conditions are right. The Mahāyāna Bodhisattvas are

<sup>229</sup> See Keown 1992: 185-191.

<sup>230</sup> Henri van Zeyst, eg, holds such a view (Ency Bsm: “Absolute,” 1961:143 f). This is a common wrong view amongst intellectuals.

<sup>231</sup> *Nirodho pi nesaṃ vutto, idha thapati, bhikkhu sīlavā hoti no ca sīla,mayo*. Of *sīla,maya*, Comy says that, being endowed with moral habits, there is nothing further than this to be done (MA 3:270). “[B]ut he does not identify with the moral virtue” is based on M:ÑB 651 ad loc. On the various meanings of *—maya*, see VvA 10.

<sup>232</sup> See Dh 97, SD 10.6 esp (5).

<sup>233</sup> See Vīmaṇsaka S (M 47.13/1:319), SD 35.6.

<sup>234</sup> See Beyond Good and Evil, SD 18.7 (8.1; 9.5).



spiritual hypostases, that is, vivid embodiments or symbols of the Buddha's qualities. Myths and stories are told about such Bodhisattvas as teaching aids or skilful means to inspire and guide the laity to goodness and awakening.

**8.4.3.2** Such skilful means are useful when we are unable to obtain or understand the Buddha's original teachings. For as our wisdom matures beyond pure undivided faith, we begin to see that the Bodhisattvas are really emptiness, just as form is emptiness. From intellectual insight, we mature into insight wisdom.

We need to let go of the reading wisdom merely on the word (*pada, parama*)<sup>235</sup> level. We need to rise above the Buddhism of the book and return to the spiritual truths and paths of the historical Buddha. We need to get on the Dharma-raft and paddle our way across the waters of samsara to the shores of nirvana. Then and there, we will find need of neither vehicles (*yāna*) nor skilful means.

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<sup>235</sup> See Gombrich 1996: 17-21.

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